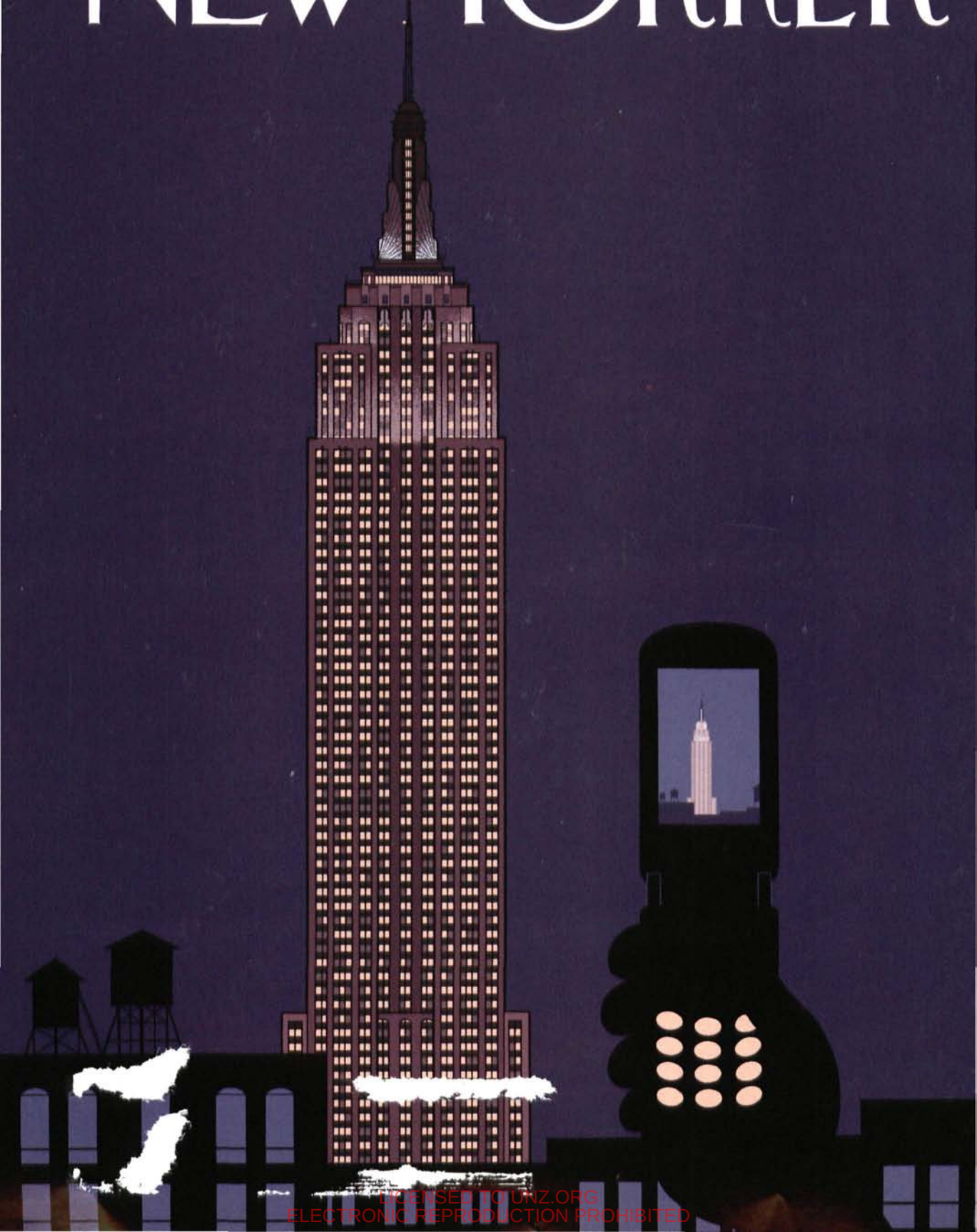


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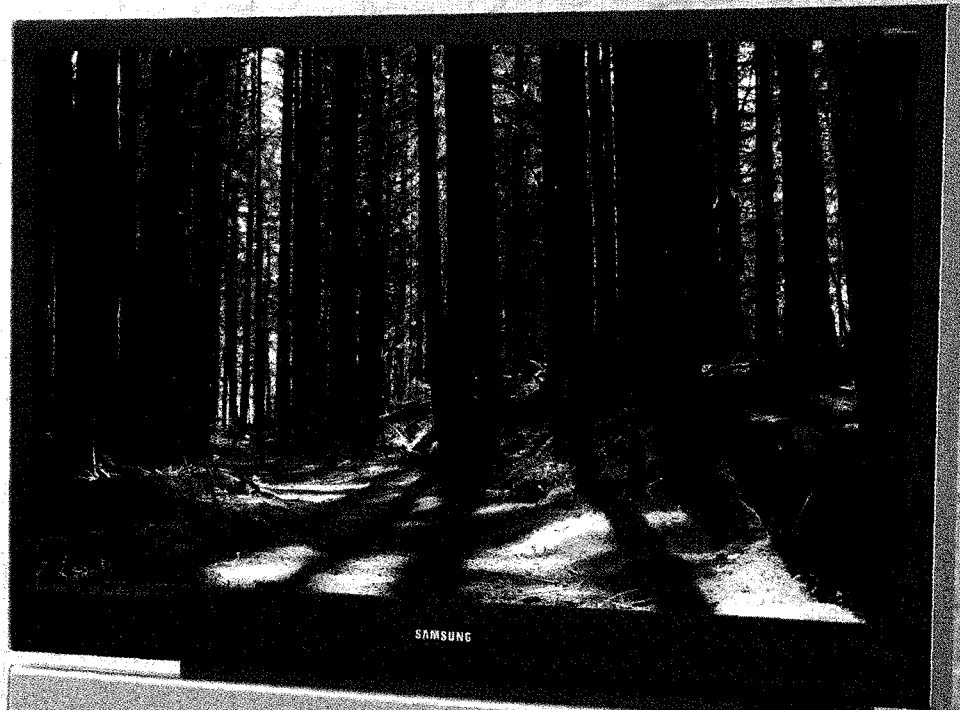
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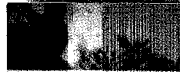
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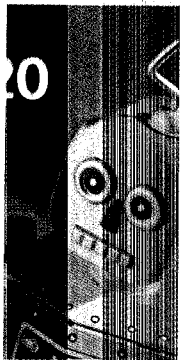
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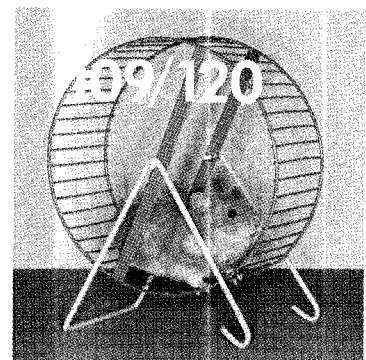
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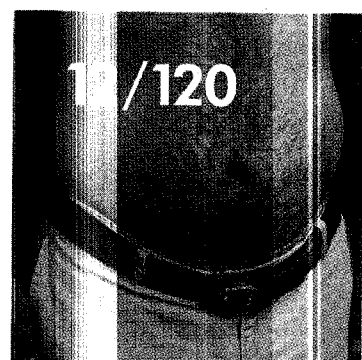
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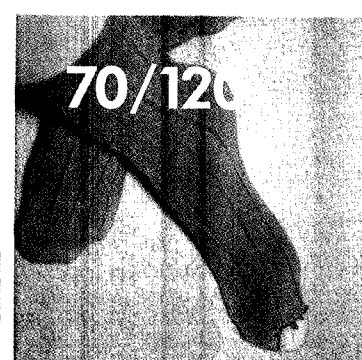
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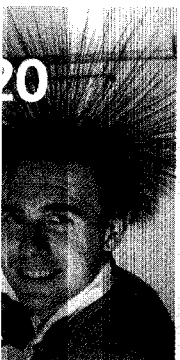
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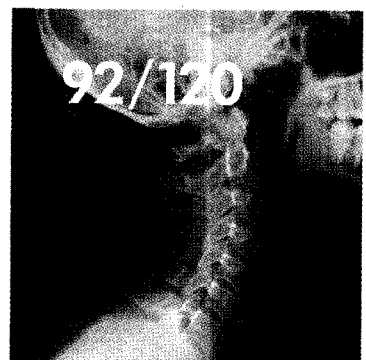
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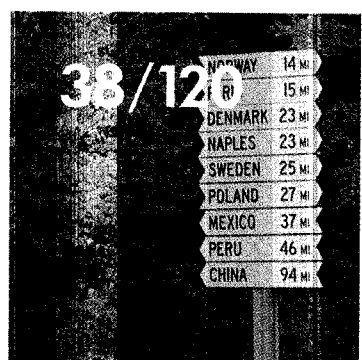
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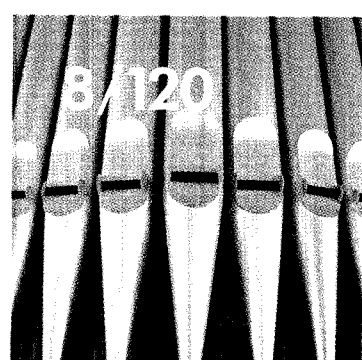
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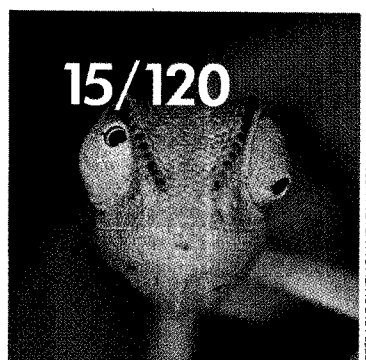
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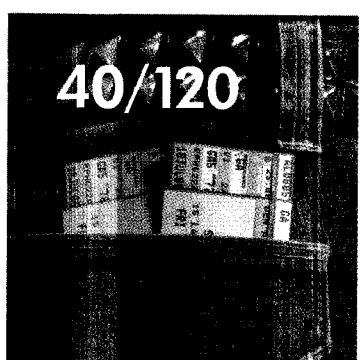
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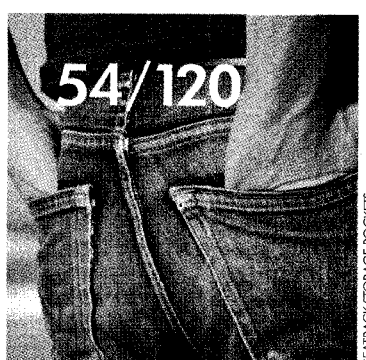
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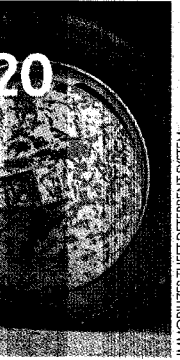
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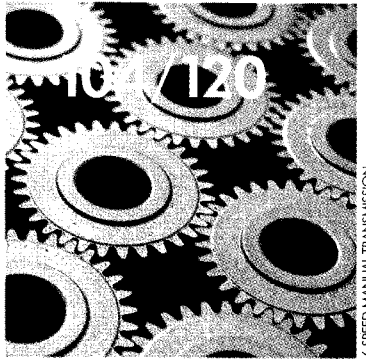
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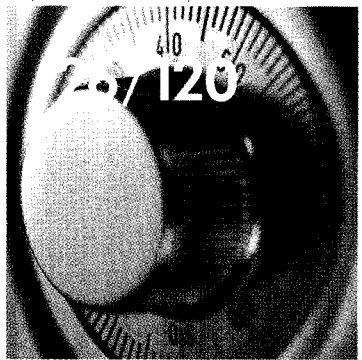
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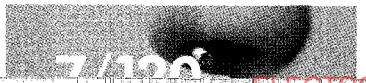
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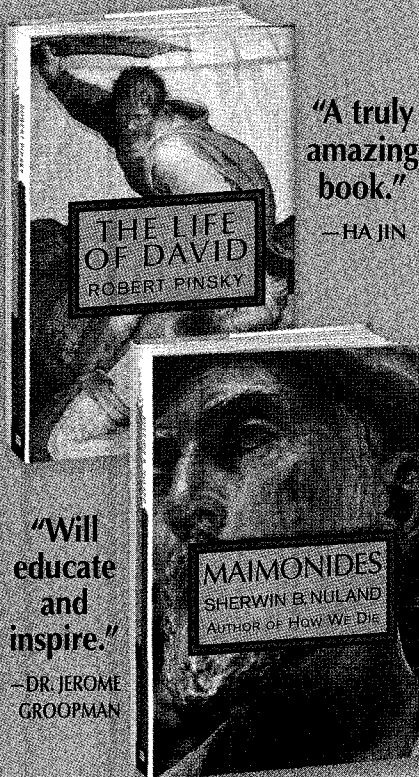
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THE NEW YORKER

OCTOBER 3, 2005

- 8 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
39 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Hendrik Hertzberg on disasters unprepared for; vengeful philanthropy.

- David Remnick* 48 LETTER FROM LOUISIANA
High Water
What Bush failed to learn from L.B.J.
Larry Doyle 59 SHOUTS & MURMURS
May We Tell You Our
Specials This Evening?
Alex Ross 60 ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS
Countdown
Composing an opera about the bomb.
John McPhee 72 A REPORTER AT LARGE
Coal Train—I
Part one of a two-part article on moving coal from the Powder River mines.
Sana Krasikov 84 FICTION
"Companion"

THE CRITICS BOOKS

- Thomas Mallon* 94 *A life of Neil Armstrong.*
Joan Acocella 99 *Zadie Smith's "On Beauty."*
101 Briefly Noted
Hilton Als 102 THE THEATRE
"Medea," the Wooster Group's "Poor Theater."
Anthony Lane 106 THE CURRENT CINEMA
Roman Polanski's "Oliver Twist."

POEMS

- Philip Levine* 50 "I Was Married on the Fiftieth
Birthday of Pablo Neruda"
Louise Glück 78 "Fugue"
Robert Mezey 96 "With a Ten-Foot Pole"

COVER "Hold Still," by Chris Ware DRAWINGS David Sipress, Alex Gregory, Drew Dernavich, Zachary Kanin, William Haefeli, Michael Maslin, Charles Barsotti, Lee Lorenz, Kim Warp, Victoria Roberts, Matthew Diffie, Leo Cullum, Bruce Eric Kaplan, George Booth, Roz Chast, Frank Cotham, Tom Cheney, Barbara Smaller, John Kane, Michael Crawford SPOTS Benoît van Innis

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CONTRIBUTORS

John McPhee (“Coal Train—I,” p. 72) has been a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1963. This piece is part of a series about freight transportation which will be published as a book, “Uncommon Carriers,” in May.

Alec Wilkinson (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 45) is the author of “My Mentor: A Young Man’s Friendship with William Maxwell” and “Mr. Apology.”

Louise Glück (Poem, p. 78) was the U.S. Poet Laureate from 2003 to 2004. Her tenth book of poems, “Averno,” will be published in the spring.

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Lillian Ross (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 42) is a longtime editorial staff member.

Alex Ross (“Countdown,” p. 60), a staff writer, is completing a book about the history of twentieth-century music.

Thomas Mallon (*Books*, p. 94) is a novelist and critic. His novels include “Two Moons” and “Bandbox.”

Istvan Banyai (*Illustration*, p. 95), the creator of “Zoom” and “Re-Zoom,” has just published another children’s book, “The Other Side.”

Joan Acocella (*Books*, p. 99) is a literary and dance critic for the magazine.

Hilton Als (*The Theatre*, p. 102) is a staff writer.

Chris Ware (Cover) will publish the sixteenth volume of “The ACME Novelty Library” in November. ♦



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UNFAIR AND UNBALANCED

Nicholas Lemann writes that the conservative radio talk-show host Hugh Hewitt found his guest Tom Brinkman "off message" when he boasted about a symbolic vote against the Fourteenth Amendment "to send a signal against the judicial activism that has occurred in this country because of the Fourteenth Amendment" ("Right Hook," August 29th). While bashing the amendment, which gave full citizenship to freed slaves, may run counter to Hewitt's desire for an inclusive Republican Party, it is by no means frivolous. During the Gilded Age, the Supreme Court, in league with politicians and robber barons, caused considerable mischief by abusing the Fourteenth Amendment. It started in 1886, when the Court ruled, in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co.*, that corporations were persons, and therefore entitled to all personhood protections afforded by the amendment. The *Santa Clara* ruling freed corporations from the control of the state legislatures, and for decades they were able to block all manner of progressive measures, from child-labor laws to unionization and campaign-finance reform.

*James Allison
Bloomington, Ind.*

Is it possible for a journalist to be objective in an absolute sense? Of course not. One person can look at Iraq, for instance, and see a marginally functional country descending into chaos; another can see a painful struggle toward a democratic state. However, the kind of journalism espoused by Hugh Hewitt, in which reporters' credibility depends upon full disclosure of their political leanings, does nothing to resolve this dichotomy. It only reinforces the view that all journalism is opinion. Yet journalists can, by training and the fostering of ethical standards within the profession, create an account of a given situation sufficiently balanced to merit the label objective. The alternative is journalism com-

pletely given over to advocacy, which is where Hewitt's prescription will lead.

*D. D. Hathaway
Venice, Calif.*

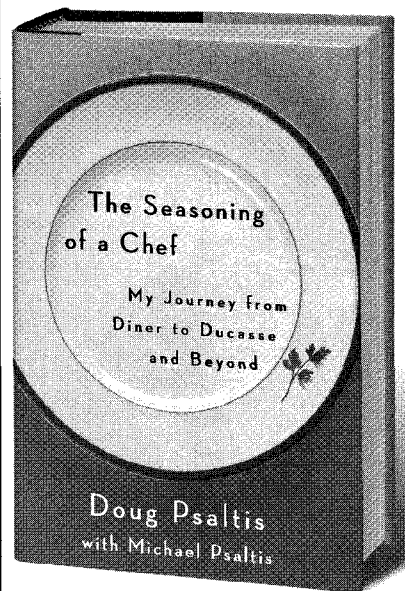
GRATUITOUS GRATUITIES?

James Surowiecki diagnoses tipping as an economic anomaly (The Financial Page, September 5th). But it is equally possible to see it as the quintessence of the free market, a rare manifestation of Adam Smith's unhindered Invisible Hand. Tipping, as Surowiecki correctly points out, does not buy service in advance. But this is true only in the most literal sense, because a waiter who receives a generous tip for good service will be encouraged to provide comparable service in the future. If all of a sudden everybody stopped tipping, waiters would quickly catch on and would lose incentive to provide good or possibly even mediocre service, and similarly if everyone started to tip generously and unconditionally. Tipping, therefore, can influence service only if it is left to the dynamic discretion of the tipper. Also, although it is inevitable that tips correlate highly with the cost of the meal, a more meaningful correlation to investigate is that between quality of service and the per-cent tip. A hundred-dollar meal served with mediocrity may merit a perfunctory fifteen-dollar tip, while an exceptionally served sixteen-dollar meal may merit a three-dollar tip. Finally, I was surprised at the quoted conclusion of Michael Lynn that tipping is only weakly correlated with service quality and is highly influenced by such factors as introducing oneself by name or touching a customer on the shoulder. Shouldn't these friendly, reassuring gestures be considered a component of good service?

*Sahand Rabbani
Stanford, Calif.*

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THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE WENDY'S WORLD

"Third," a new play by Wendy Wasserstein, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of "The Heidi Chronicles," stars Dianne Wiest as a college professor who accuses a student of plagiarism. (See page 12.)

NIGHT LIFE ALL IN THE FAMILY

The up-and-coming country duo Hanna-McEuen, a pair of cousins whose fathers are key members of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, makes its first

New York City appearance this week, opening for the terrifyingly consistent Dwight Yoakam at Irving Plaza. (See page 14.)

ART PAPER CUTS

Yuken Teruya's selection of paper shopping bags intricately carved into tiny dioramas of trees and foliage was a tremendous success at P.S. 1's "Greater New York" show this summer; now José Bienvenu presents an entire, satisfying show of Teruya's work—more delicate treatments of consumer throwaways—at her Chelsea gallery through Oct. 15. (See page 22.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC FINGER PAINTING

György Ligeti's *Études* for solo piano, as enchanting as they are difficult, are beginning to take their place in the repertory alongside those of Chopin and Scriabin. Taka Kigawa, an impressive advocate for contemporary music, performs a selection of them this week. (See page 28.)

MOVIES THE EXPLORER

In Werner Herzog's "Aguirre, the Wrath of God," from 1972, the director's most frequent (and most volatile)

collaborator, the actor Klaus Kinski, plays the insane sixteenth-century explorer. The film screens this week at the Museum of the Moving Image. (See page 32.)

READINGS AND TALKS KATRINA AID

The Bowery Poetry Club and the Poetry Project both offer hurricane-relief benefits this week, featuring Toni Morrison, Cecil Taylor, Yosef Komunyakaa, Marc Ribot, Taylor Mead, and others. (See page 36.)

Jenny Holzer's new work projects poetry onto buildings. Photograph by Sylvia Plachy.

The world consumes two barrels of oil for every barrel discovered.

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The energy industry needs to get more from existing fields while continuing to search for new reserves. Automakers must continue to improve fuel efficiency and perfect hybrid vehicles. Technological improvements are needed so that wind, solar and hydrogen can be more viable parts of the energy equation. Governments need to create energy policies that promote economically and environmentally sound development. Consumers must demand, and be willing to pay for, some of these solutions, while practicing conservation efforts of their own.

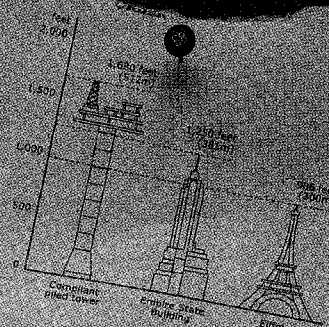
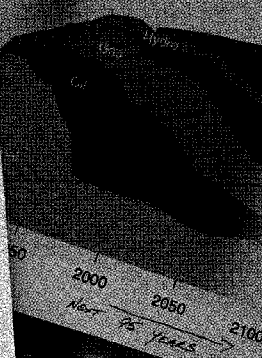
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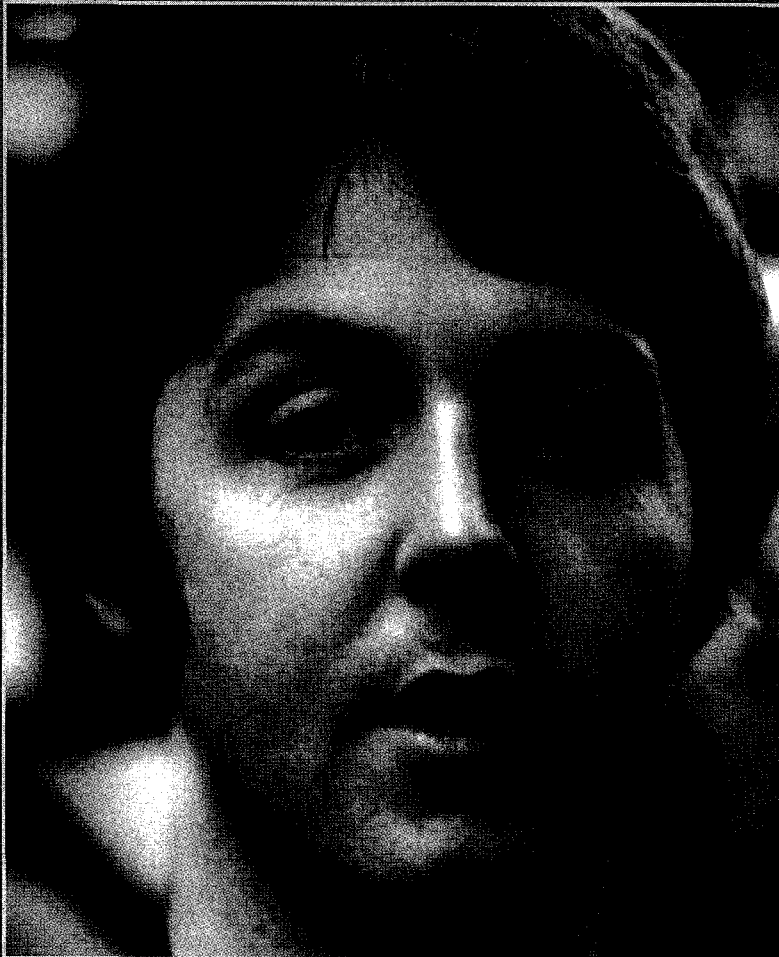
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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK METRIC SYSTEM

Metric was born late. This Toronto-based guitar band could have found itself a bona-fide mainstream career in the mid-nineties, when brainy female-fronted guitar bands like the Breeders got their fifteen minutes on MTV and an outside chance at platinum sales. Now, along with a hundred other artists with birth dates earlier than 1990 and no rapping in their songs, Metric is unlikely to



get much play on MTV—or any other TV, for that matter (an appearance on “The O.C.” is worth about a month of radio rotation these days). As a result, they stand no chance in popular music’s marketplace. Metric shouldn’t be a hard sell: the singer Emily Haines is bony, telegenic, and whip smart, and the music is a taut version of rock that respects hooks and disdains lassitude. The band has been outspoken in its criticism of the Bush Administration, and the lyrics of its recent album “Live It Out” hover between a healthy skepticism and outright paranoia. Onstage, though, they are an energetic, optimistic bunch, more than happy to embrace whoever shows up to hear them. They play next week at the Bowery Ballroom and Southpaw.

—Sasha Frere-Jones

THE THEATRE OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

ABSURD PERSON SINGULAR

Alan Ayckbourn’s triptych brings together three couples of different social classes on consecutive Christmas Eves. The Manhattan Theatre Club revival stars Mireille Enos, Clea Lewis, Sam Robards, Alan Ruck, Deborah Rush, and Paxton Whitehead. John Tillinger directs. In previews. (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

COLDER THAN HERE

MCC Theatre opens its twentieth-anniversary season with the U.S. premiere of a dark comedy by Laura Wade, about a detail-oriented homemaker who plans her own funeral. The cast includes Judith Light, Brian Murray, Sarah Paulson, and Lily Rabe. Abigail Morris directs. Opens Sept. 28 at 7. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200.)

CYCLING PAST THE MATTERHORN

Shirley Knight and Brenda Wehle star in a comedy by Deborah Grimby, about a street psychic and her mother, who is losing her sight but not her wit. Directed by Eleanor Holdridge. In previews. Opens Sept. 29 at 7. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

IN MY LIFE

A romance between a musician with Tourette’s syndrome and an obsessive-compulsive journalist is the subject of this new musical written and directed by Joseph Brooks, the composer of the pop ballad “You Light Up My Life.” Opens Sept. 28 at 7. (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

IN THE WINGS

Jeremy Dobrish directs a new play by Stewart F. Lane, about a couple of wannabe actors whose romance is imperilled when one of them gets a lucky break. Opens Sept. 28 at 8. (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 212-239-6200.)

LATINOLOGUES

A collection of comic and thoughtful monologues about the Latino experience in America comes to Broadway from the West Coast. Directed by Cheech Marin and written by Rick Najera. In previews. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE MASTER BUILDER

Ibsen’s play about an architect with a heavy conscience comes to the Pearl, in a production directed by Shepard Sobel. In previews. Opens Oct. 2 at 7. (80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

A NAKED GIRL ON THE APPIAN WAY

Richard Thomas and Jill Clayburgh star in a new comic drama by Richard Greenberg (“Take Me Out”), about parents whose lives are disrupted when their grown children return from a year abroad with surprising news. In previews. Opens Oct. 6. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

A SOLDIER’S PLAY

Charles Fuller’s Pulitzer Prize-winning drama from 1981 about a murder in a black battalion in Louisiana during the Second World War receives its first major New York revival. Taye Diggs, Anthony Mackie, James McDaniel, and Steven Pasquale lead the cast. Jo Bonney directs. In previews. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

THIRD

Wendy Wasserstein’s new play, about a college professor who accuses a student of plagiarism, stars Dianne Wiest, Charles Durning, and Jason Ritter. Directed by Daniel Sullivan. Previews begin Sept. 29. (Mitzi Newhouse Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

A WOMAN OF WILL

Amanda McBroom, author of the 1979 hit ballad “The Rose,” has written the book and lyrics for this musical about a modern lyricist who rhapsodizes about Shakespeare’s leading ladies as she tries to write songs for an update of “The Merchant of Venice.” Music by Joel Silberman, who also directs. In previews. Opens Oct. 2 at 6:30. (Daryl Roth, 101 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

THE BLOWIN OF BAILE GALL

A construction worker named Eamon (Colin Hamell), who is renovating an old house in a small Irish town, has multiple axes to grind, and he involves his boss (George C. Heslin) and his co-workers in a non-stop whirlwind of invective, complaint, and prejudice. Life in this town—and throughout Ireland, we’re meant to understand—is a struggle between the people who are “from here” and the “blowins.” When the boss hires Laurence (the arresting Ato Essandoh), an illegal immigrant from Africa, to join the crew, the situation explodes. There’s plenty of action in Ronan Noone’s play, but not enough wit or subtlety, and the fight scenes are some of the most unconvincing ever staged. Directed by David Sullivan. (Irish Arts Center, 553 W. 51st St. 212-868-4444.)

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY:

SPECIAL VICTIMS UNIT

Gerard Alessandrini’s long-running Broadway spoof has added a few new shows to its list of targets. While it’s tricky to send up tongue-in-cheek musicals like “Avenue Q” and “Spamalot,” Alessandrini finds easy prey in “The Light in the Piazza”—an earnest musical whose plot involves a pony kick to the head. Elsewhere, the revue takes aim at Christina Applegate’s broken foot, Yoko Ono’s opportunism, and the goyim in the cast of “Fiddler on the Roof.” (47th Street Theatre, 304 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

FRAN’S BED

Mia Farrow stars in Playwrights Horizons’ thirty-fifth-anniversary season opener, a play written and directed by James Lapine (“Passion,” “Sunday in the Park with George”), about a woman who revisits her memories as she lies in a sickbed, surrounded by her family. (416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Oct. 9.)

THE GREAT AMERICAN

TRAILER PARK MUSICAL

Set in a Florida trailer park called Armadillo Acres, this musical comedy has a book by Betsy Kelso (who directs), music and lyrics by David Nehls, and a set by Derek McLane (“I Am My Own Wife”). (Dodger Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE INTELLIGENT DESIGN OF

JENNY CHOW

Set in the suburbs of L.A., Rolin Jones’s play could be a sci-fi sequel to “Fast Times at Ridgemont High.” Its heroine, Jennifer Marcus (the agitated Julianne Hanzelka Kim), is twenty-two, lives at home, and has no friends besides the ones she meets on the Web (all played by the funny, versatile Remy Auberjonois) and a pizza-delivery boy (Ryan King, channelling Judge Reinhold in “Fast Times”). Poor Jennifer is also agoraphobic, obsessive-compulsive, and adopted. She builds a robot (the Jenny Chow of the title) that is supposed to fly to China and find her birth mother. Jennifer’s tics and the over-stuffed plot threaten to overwhelm the story, but shrewd, quick direction by Jackson Gay keeps the mother-daughter-robot issues from bogging down, and Takeshi Kata’s cunning set has more twists than a Rubik’s Cube. (336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200.)

KISSING FIDEL

Eduardo Machado’s cluttered new drama is set in a high-class Miami funeral parlor, where an irritable Cuban émigré family gathers to bicker and spit out its many dark secrets. But even a barrage of slaps, tears, denunciations, nudity, incestuous kisses, and tales of self-mutilation can barely jolt the play out of its underlying torpor. Michael John Garcés directs. (Kirk, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

MEDEA

The Classical Theatre of Harlem presents its 2002 production of the tragedy, adapted and directed by Alfred Preisser. April Yvette Thompson plays the title role. (Reviewed in this issue.) (HSA Theatre, 645 St. Nicholas Ave., near 141st St. 212-868-4444.)

MIRACLE BROTHERS

Kirsten Childs’s sparkling new musical is a delight. Set in a lush green jungle, it follows two river dolphins, who leave the spirit world to be incarnated as human boys on a plantation in seventeenth-

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century colonial Brazil. One brother (Clifton Oliver) is born to a black slave, the other (Tyler Maynard) to the white mistress—though both are fathered by the master (Jay Goede). As murder and betrayal divide the boys and they search for refuge, a swirl of dashing choreography (by Mark Dendy) and stirring songwriting (by Childs) carries us from scene to scene, making the journey a pleasure every step of the way. Directed by Tina Landau. (Vineyard Theatre, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

MOTHER COURAGE

A new translation by Marc Blitzstein of Brecht's classic begins the Jean Cocteau Repertory's thirty-fifth season. David Fuller directs. (Bouwerie Lane, 330 Bowery, at Bond St. 212-279-4200.)

NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL

The sophomore season of the hardy young showcase presents eighteen new musicals, including "Nerds://A Musical Software Satire," a look at the rise of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. (For festival schedule and venue information, visit www.nymf.org. Through Oct. 2.)

NO FOREIGNERS BEYOND THIS POINT

This new play by Warren Leight ("Side Man"), based on his own experiences in 1980, is about two East Coast liberals teaching English in Guangdong, China. Presented by Ma-Yi Theatre Company and directed by Loy Arcenas. (Culture Project, 45 Bleecker St. 212-352-3101.)

ONE-MAN STAR WARS TRILOGY

In this inspired act of madness, the Canadian actor Charles Ross recaps "Star Wars," "The Empire Strikes Back," and "The Return of the Jedi" in a single hour, portraying every character and even the floating words in the films' opening credits. (Lamb's Theatre, 130 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

PASTORALIA

George Saunders's story about a man and a woman whose day job is playing Neanderthals in a theme park has been adapted for the stage by Yehuda Duenyas. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. Through Oct. 9.)

THE PAVILION

Two former sweethearts confront their regrets at a high-school reunion, in a drama by Craig Wright ("Orange Flower Water"), presented by the Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre. As the pair, played by Brian D'Arcy James and Jennifer Mudge, sort through their ugly past, a narrator (Stephen Bogardus) delivers sprawling soliloquies that cast a metaphysical light on the action. The play, with its quirky blend of the intimate and the ontological, doesn't quite work, but Wright has a flair for pithy dialogue and offhand lyricism. Directed by Lucie Tiberghien. (224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444. Through Oct. 9.)

POOR THEATRE

The latest production of the Wooster Group is an exploration of the boundaries of theatre that pays homage to Jerzy Grotowski, William Forsythe, and Max Ernst. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. 212-868-4444.)

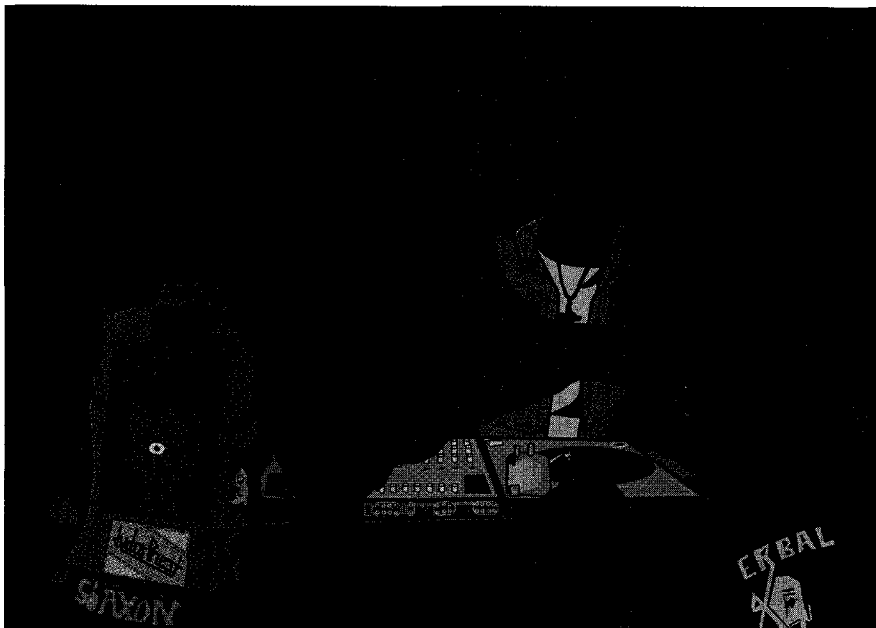
SPIRIT

Narrating a tale of three brothers in a war-torn country, the actors Guy Dartnell, Phelim McDermott, and Lee Simpson perch atop a precipitously tilted wooden ramp, which will become a bed, a city in wartime, and a stretcher before the evening ends. The rubber-limbed performers poke their heads out of various removable tiles on the surface of the wooden slope, exchanging lines of Pinteresque dialogue (some of it improvised). Created by Improbable, the company behind "Shockheaded Peter." (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200. Through Oct. 9.)

Also Playing

ALTAR BOYZ: Dodger Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST:** Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 212-307-4747. **CHICAGO:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG:** Hilton, 213 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4100. **DEDICATION OR THE STUFF OF DREAMS:** 59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. (Through Oct. 2.) **DIRTY ROTTEN SCOUNDRELS:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **DOUBT:** Walter Kerr, 219

W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **DRUMSTRUCK:** Dodger Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200. **FIDDLER ON THE ROOF:** Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4100. **FOOLS IN LOVE:** Manhattan Ensemble Theatre, 55 Mercer St. 212-239-6200. **HAIRSPRAY:** Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100. **THE LIGHT IN THE PIAZZA:** Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **MAMMA MIA!** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-563-5544. **MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **MOVIN' OUT:** Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-307-4100. **ONCE AROUND THE SUN:** Zipper, 336 W. 37th St.



The Beast, a heavy-metal party in the basement of Tonic, on the Lower East Side.

212-239-6200. **ORSON'S SHADOW:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **THE PILLOWMAN:** Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **SWEET CHARITY:** Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **THOM PAIN (BASED ON NOTHING):** DR2, 103 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-307-4100.

NIGHT LIFE ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

"ACROSS THE NARROWS"

Spread over two days and two boroughs, this sizable, unprecedented festival foists difficult choices on the passionate indie-rock fan. Day one, should you go to Brooklyn for the Pixies, Gang of Four, Built to Spill, Rilo Kiley, Death from Above 1979, Mando Diao, and Nine Black Alps, or should you head to Staten Island for the Killers, the New York Dolls, Interpol, British Sea Power, Tegan and Sara, the Ordinary Boys, and Lake Trout? The second day doesn't get any easier: Beck, Belle & Sebastian, the Polyphonic Spree, the Raveonettes, and Gang Gang Dance are in Coney Island, and Oasis, Jet, Doves, the Lemonheads, Kasabian, Jesse Malin, and the Redwalls play Staten Island. (Keyspan Park, 1904 Surf Ave., Coney Island; Richmond County Bank Ballpark, 75 Richmond Terrace. 212-307-7171. Oct. 1-2.)

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL

237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Sept. 29: In the seventies, the folk-rock band America crafted songs rife with sunny harmonies and plangently plucked acoustic guitars. "A Horse with No Name," "Sister Golden Hair," and "Ventura Highway" are standards of lite radio. Oct. 3: The Jamaican dancehall singer and d.j. Capleton blends reggae with

modern electronic rhythms. His dedication to the evolving genre began as a young boy, when he would sneak out of his house to hear the sound-system battles that gave birth to the music. He later took the style to a new level by moving the lyrical content away from a focus on guns. Capleton's shows in Paris were cancelled this summer for fear of protests over anti-homosexual lyrics in some of his music; more recently, however, a prominent British gay-rights group said that he has kept his promise to cease performing the offending songs.

BOWERY BALLROOM

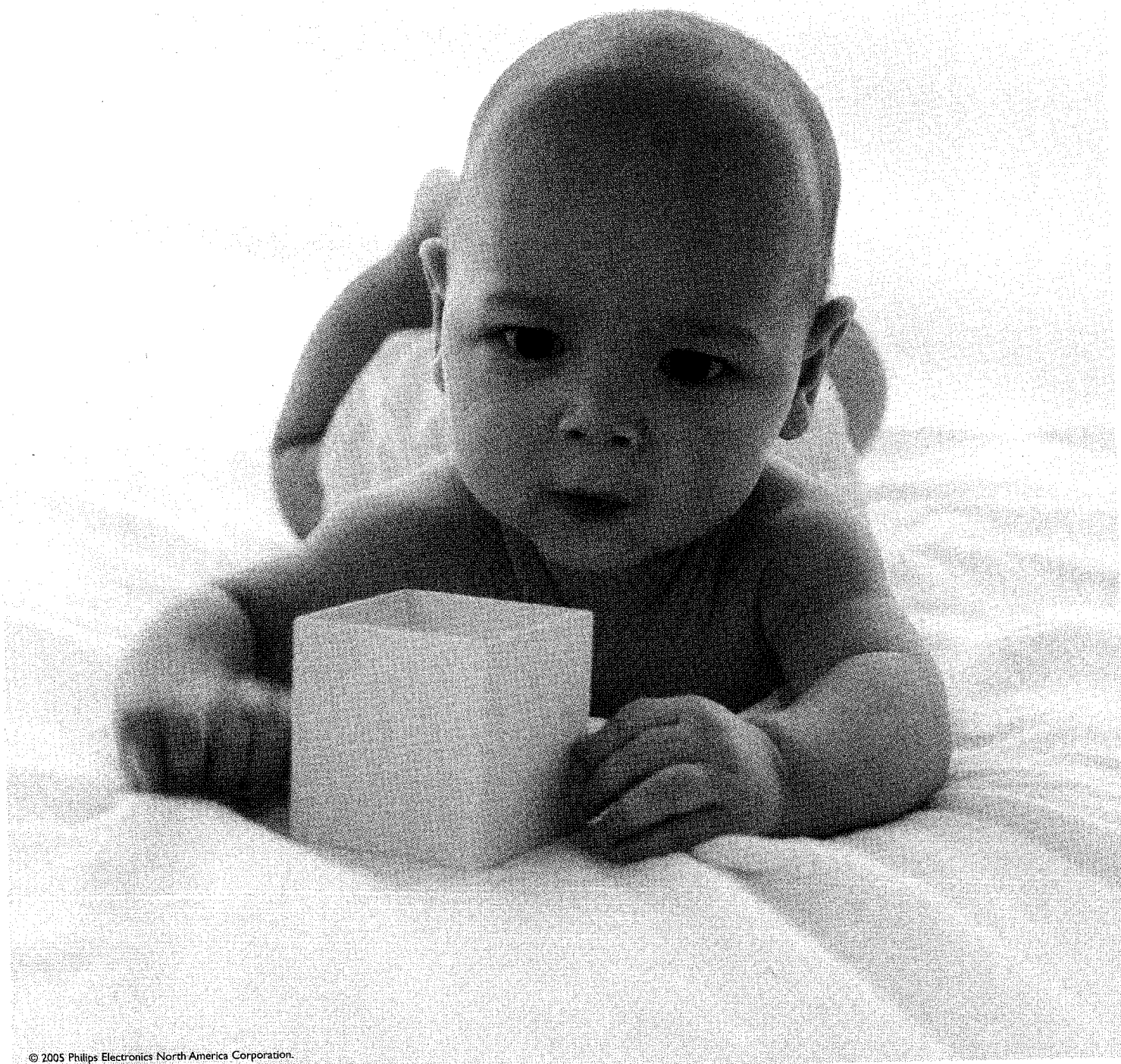
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Sept. 29: The Posies. In the early nineties, this fabled Seattle outfit pushed harmony-laden power pop while the rest of its city went grunge. The nation went grunge as well, leaving the Posies little more than a loyal cult following. The group recently rewarded devoted fans with a new album, "Every Kind of Light," its first in seven years. Sept. 30: The Electric Six, another backward-looking band from the garage-rock epicenter of Detroit, set themselves apart by keeping a distinctly tongue-in-cheek approach and by peppering their music with jittery dance tempos and other funky flourishes. Their latest album, "Señor Smoke," includes a stream-of-consciousness ballad titled "Jimmy Carter," which mentions the thirty-second, thirty-ninth, and fortieth Presidents.

IRVING PLAZA

17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Sept. 28: The country star and actor Dwight Yoakam swings by with songs from his new release, "Blame the Vain." With Hanna-McEuen, a tight duo (they're cousins) who trace their roots back to the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (their dads are key members). Sept. 30: Despite being a friend and peer of his fellow Detroit rocker Jack White, of the White Stripes, Brendan Benson mostly eschews bluesy garage in favor of melodic power pop. His latest album, "The Alternative to Love," is a hook-laden affair harkening back to bands like Big Star and the Beatle protégés Badfinger.

MERCURY LOUNGE

217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—Sept. 28: Neoclassic rock from Vancouver's Black Mountain. Sept. 30: The Heartless Bastards. Erika Wennerstrom, a petite woman with a cavernous voice, leads this high-voltage trio from Cincinnati in overpowering blues-rock originals. Oct. 1: England's New Model Army, long renowned at home as humorless purveyors of righteous vengeance, are virtually unknown here. Their latest album, "Carnival," shows they've lost none of their convictions: it devotes great energy to demanding retribution for crimes committed by eco-insensitive, warmongering governments.



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NORTHSIX

66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-5103)—Sept. 28: The prolific and eclectic San Francisco rockers **Deerhoof**.

SATALLA

37 W. 26th St. (212-576-1155)—The guillotine-sharp singer-songwriter **Amy Rigby**, a former postmodern girl grouper (the Shams) and cow-punk (the East Village hillbilly band the Last Roundup), chronicled single motherhood nearly a decade ago on her solo debut, "Diary of a Mod Housewife." She's here Oct. 1 with songs from her newly released fifth album, "Little Fugitive." It finds her embracing middle age with her trademark wit, comparing herself to Rasputin on one song (as an example of her resiliency) and rhyming "croque monsieur" with "working poor" on another.

S.O.B.'S

204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (212-243-4940)—Oct. 4-5: Led by Marie Daulne, **Zap Mama** weaves a vocal tapestry out of cool, sweet melodies and African, European, and American hip-hop rhythms. Zap Mama began as an a cappella group, but in the late nineties, Daulne—a native Zairean of Belgian descent who currently lives in the States—added instruments. She has spent the last few years collaborating with members of the Philadelphia hip-hop scene. Ahmir (?uestlove) Thomp-

TOWN HALL

123 W. 43rd St. (212-840-2824)—Sept. 29: The clear-voiced and clear-eyed singer-songwriter **Dar Williams**.

WEBSTER HALL

125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—Oct. 4-5: The **Decemberists**, a Portland, Oregon, theatrical folk-pop band led by the singer, songwriter, and guitarist **Colin Meloy**, infuse quirky tales of faraway lands with bits of maritime lore.

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE

Oct. 1: **Yacouba Moumouni**, a master of the whistery Fulani reed flute known as the *seyse*, leads his band, **Mamar Kassey**, in a night of Afro-pop to benefit his homeland, Niger. (Skirball Center, New York University, 566 LaGuardia Pl., at Washington Sq. S.) Oct. 2: The music of Veracruz, Mexico, with the folkloric ensemble **Tlen-Huicani**. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information about both shows, call 212-545-7536.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL

59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Sept. 27-Oct. 8: The vocalist **Maude Maggart**, the sister of Fiona Apple, presents an Irving Berlin program.



TABLES FOR TWO CONVIVIAM OSTERIA

68 Fifth Ave., at St. Mark's Pl., Brooklyn (718-857-1833)—This almost too perfect evocation of a Mediterranean osteria seems straight from the pages of a romance novel—the sultry amber light, the dusty wine bottles and guttering candles, the dully gleaming copper pots that line the walls. Even the waiters fit the theme: swarthy, handsome, with windswept hair and black shirts unbuttoned just so. While the weather holds, the garden is a singularly inviting spot, sheltered by a latticework of greenery and enlivened by the trickling of a fountain. The table is laid with simple, rustic silverware, thick ceramic plates, and a dewy, chipped water pitcher. With such an overdose of atmospheric charm, even mediocre food would seem delightful.

The concession is rarely necessary. The platter of seafood tapas has a fine selection of variously prepared treats, from a passable mackerel seiche to the enormously pleasing shrimp-and-béchal fritters. Grilled octopus comes perched atop a bed of celery, tomato, and onion, which gives the tender flesh a crunchy kick. Less successful are the whole

grilled sardines, which arrive with heads and tails upturned inquisitively and with a deeply charred outer layer that has to be peeled away to get a few meagre bites of the tart, salty fish.

The entrées are more consistent, and the attention-grabber of the menu is the Niman Ranch rib eye for two, which comes on a great wooden slab, oozing juices—the seasoned crust is a bit overbearing, and the meat can be a little too marbled, but it's still satisfying. And the kitchen can occasionally achieve brilliance, as it did one recent evening with a special of quail laid over risotto and port sauce.

The menu, refreshingly, doesn't change much with the seasons; in fact, it's hardly changed at all over the nearly five years the restaurant has perched on this stretch of gradually gentrifying Fifth Avenue. But then, the consistency of the menu is of a piece with the sense that, at Convivium, one can escape both time and place. (Open daily for dinner. Entrées \$13-\$24; \$70 for the rib eye.)

—Andrea Thompson

son, Common, and Erykah Badu appear on the group's latest album, "Ancestry in Progress," from 2004.

SUPPER CLUB

240 W. 47th St. (212-921-1940)—Sept. 28: **Ashlee Simpson**, bloodied but apparently unbowed after her touchingly bad performance last year on "Saturday Night Live," returns to the teen-pop fray. The younger Simpson has a lot riding on her forthcoming album, "I Am Me." Her role in the dead-on-arrival box-office flop "Undiscovered" early this year only adds to the pressure.

TONIC

107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—Thursday nights, during the **Beast** party, the basement lounge of this avant new-music venue becomes a haven for a not so obscure, but often misunderstood genre: heavy metal. The music is loud, the videos are vintage, and the leather-clad attendees can parse the distinctions between thrash, black, and glam metal with remarkable ease.

BLUE NOTE

131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Sept. 29-Oct. 2: The Brazilian chanteuse **Bebel Gilberto**.

CARLYLE HOTEL

Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wrap-around murals, and, through Oct. 29, **Elaine Stritch**. She's still here, singing, spinning juicy (and brutally honest) anecdotes, and throwing in a bit of good-natured cussing. It all comes straight from the heart, and she's among the last of a classy breed.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA

Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Sept. 28: The Women in Jazz Festival winds down this month with the drummer **Cindy Blackman** and the soprano saxophonist **Jane Ira Bloom**. Sept. 29: The pianist **Joanne Brackeen**, followed by **Bertha Hope** and **Jazzberry Jam**. Sept. 30-Oct. 1: The veteran pianist and singer **Barbara Carroll** and her trio.

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY

540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—It's usually a family affair when the talented and genial guitarist and singer **John Pizzarelli** (here Sept. 27-Oct. 8) settles in. That's the case this time around, only a little less so: his wife, the vocalist **Jessica Molasky**, isn't joining him, but his father, **Bucky**, the dean of classic jazz guitar, is.

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER

Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—Sept. 30-Oct. 1: The **Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra** is joined in the Rose Theatre by prestigious guests, including the saxophonists **Joe Lovano** and **Greg Osby** and the trumpeter **Lew Soloff**.

JAZZ GALLERY

290 Hudson St., near Spring St. (212-242-1063)—**Kenny Kirkland**, a pianist celebrated for his work with **Branchford Marsalis** and other peers, would have turned fifty this week. The drummer **Jeff (Tain) Watts**, another Marsalis associate, salutes his former bandmate on Sept. 29-Oct. 2.

JAZZ STANDARD

116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Oct. 4: The **Moutin Reunion Quartet's** new album, "Something Like Now," finds the brothers **François**, on bass, and **Louis**, on drums, back with the highly touted saxophonist **Rick Margitza**.

VILLAGE VANGUARD

178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Sept. 27-Oct. 2: **Jason Moran** and **Bandwagon**. His last album, "The Same Mother," focussed on the blues in its many permutations, but there's no telling where this nervy pianist is heading these days, which makes him endlessly fascinating. The open-minded rhythm team of the bassist **Tarus Mateen** and the drummer **Nasheet Waits** joins him here. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—"The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult." Opens Sept. 27. ♦ When **Charles IV** was crowned King of Bohemia, in 1347, he set out to make Prague a cultural and artistic capital, like Rome or Paris, a place that would attract and encourage scholars and artists. The great flowering of art and architecture that occurred during his reign and those of his two sons, **Wenceslas IV** and **Sigismund**, is celebrated in "Prague, the Crown of Bohemia, 1347-1437." Through Jan. 3. ♦ "Sol LeWitt on the Roof: Splotches, Whirls, and Twirls." A warm-weather installation in the roof garden, featuring five spiky stalagmite sculptures and a wall drawing. Through Oct. 30. ♦ The centerpiece of "The Art of Medicine in Ancient Egypt" is a fifteen-foot papyrus (ca. 1650-1550 B.C.), on loan from the New York Academy of Medicine, explaining the diagnosis and treatment of wounds to the head, neck, and shoulders by means both scientific and magical. Ointment jars, statues of healing gods, implements, and mummies will also be on view. Through Jan. 15. ♦ The Costume Institute presents "Rara Avis: Selections from the Iris Barrel Apfel Collection." Through Jan. 22. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—"The High Line" details **Field Operations** and **Diller Scofidio & Renfro's** ambitious urban rails-to-trails scheme for the abandoned elevated tracks that run along the West Side from Gansevoort Street to Thirty-fourth Street. Through Oct. 31. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—The sprawling exhibition "Russia!" includes most everything you might think could fit under that rubric: gilt religious icons dating from the Middle Ages, Renaissance-era Western European paintings from imperial collections, romanticized portraits of peasant life, socialist-realist propaganda, early-modernist



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masterworks from the collections of industrialists and oligarchs, videos made just this year. Many of the items have not left Russia in centuries, if at all; pieces like Malevich's "Black Square" (which usually lives at the Hermitage), Vasily Perov's portrait of Dostoyevsky (the only one painted in the writer's lifetime), and the fifteenth-century icons of Andrei Rublev will be entirely new to most American eyes. Through Jan. 11. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—"Robert Smithson," a retrospective of drawings, constructions, and collages, includes filmed, photographed, and sketched documentation of the iconic "Spiral Jetty." Through Oct. 23. ♦ Early-twentieth-century painters liberated the grid from its utilitarian function—that is, they transferred their study compositions to larger surfaces—but the exhibition "Building and Breaking the Grid, 1962-2002" tracks the flowering of contemporary grid mania. From its heyday in the pseudo-scientific mid-sixties and seventies come drawings on graph paper by Mel Bochner, Carl Andre, and Robert Morris. Mark Lombardi's drawings diagramming the connections between parties in various economic and political scandals (like Khashoggi, Marcos, and the Bank of Credit and Commerce International) are highly conceptual and historical, reminiscent of Renaissance schematics. Sol LeWitt's cute little "Untitled Cube (6)" (1968), which sits at the center of the room, offers literal, archetypal proof of minimalism's obsession with geometry. Through Jan. 8. ♦ "Still Life: A Vital Theme" uses works from the permanent collection to explore the still-life tradition in the twentieth century. Opens Sept. 28. ♦ "The New City: Sub/Urbia in Recent Photography" explores the poetry of the strip mall, parking lot, and front yard with photographs by Walead Beshty, Amir Zaki, and Zoe Leonard, among others. Opens Sept. 30. ♦ Work by eight artists, including Terry Winters, Ati Maier, and Matthew Ritchie, is on display in "Remote Viewing: Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing." Through Oct. 9. ♦ "Banks Violette: Untitled" contemplates the romantic sublime with a model of a ruined church cast in salt and music composed by the black-metal musician Snorre Ruch. Through Oct. 2. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

ASIA SOCIETY

Park Ave. at 70th St. (212-288-6400)—Recent work by Dinh Q. Lê is on view in "Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium." Through Jan. 15. ♦ "Images of the Divine: South and Southeast Asian Sculpture from the Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection" gathers a small but lovely assortment of stone and cast-metal statuary from all over the continent. Through Jan. 8. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Friday evenings until 9.)

DRAWING CENTER

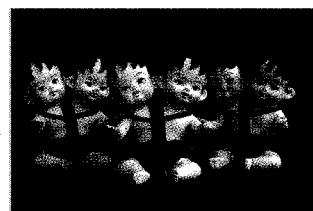
35 Wooster St. (212-219-2166)—The Trinidadian artist Peter Minshall designs costumes and performances for carnival—and for pageants like the opening ceremonies for the 2002 winter Olympics, in Salt Lake City. "Looking at the Spirits: Peter Minshall's Carnival Drawings" presents hundreds of his preparatory sketches. Through Oct. 29. (Open Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 to 6, and Saturdays, 11 to 6.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY

1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. (212-857-0000)—Even if André Kertész's name doesn't evoke a flash of recognition, his photographs surely will. Over the course of a career that began (circa 1920) in Budapest, flowered in Paris, and floundered in New York before his late-life triumph here in the nineteen-sixties, Kertész made a number of images that have become icons of modernism. Sarah Greenough's exhibition locates these greatest hits—"Satiric Dancer," "Chez Mondrian," "Washington Square"—in the broader context of Kertész's sixty-year output, and allows us to follow—often through rare, tiny vintage prints—the development of a visual language that valued poetry as much as pre-

**CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SAIGON SERENADE**

Dinh Q. Lê was ten when his family fled Vietnam, in 1978. A decade ago, he moved back, and the work in his new Asia Society show, "Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium," was produced in Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon. In between, he lived in the United States (mostly in Los Angeles, but also in Williamsburg before it was hip), where, in the early nineteen-nineties, he began



exhibiting large photographs that were woven in the densely patterned style of Vietnamese grass mats. This technique allows Lê to intercut disparate images that resolve and dissolve like phantoms. The current show includes only three of these pieces—all filtering the brutal reality of the Vietnam War through Hollywood's version of that conflict—but their virtuoso mix of montage and mosaic is dazzling. Fibreglass garden sculpture and plastic toys of children deformed by Agent Orange are insidiously charming, but, like the big postcard that invites viewers to "Come back to My Lai for its beaches," they're uncharacteristically facile. A huge, loosely stitched patchwork of abandoned family snapshots suspended from the ceiling is more soulful: Lê discovers a key to Vietnam's human history in the lost and found.

—Vince Aletti

DINH Q. LÊ, "DAMAGED GENE" (1998)

Without Ambilight.

With Ambilight.



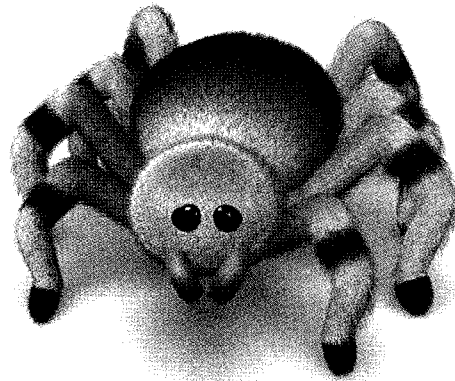
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cision. Through Nov. 27. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, and Saturdays and Sundays, 10 to 6, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—“Scratch” presents work by the museum’s three artists-in-residence for 2004-05: Michael Queenland, William Cordova, and Marc André Robinson. Through Oct. 23. ♦ “hrim: pictures,” a survey of Harlem photographs by James Van Der Zee, Aaron Siskind, Gordon Parks, and Dawoud Bey, among others. Through Oct. 23. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6; Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

sion and then collaborated on a children’s book, the result might look something like the drawings of Dzama. A militaristic palette of brown, khaki, and blood red accents Dzama’s human-animal hybrids, who cavort in totemic forests, shoot their rifles, prune their roses, and point in glee at suffering as they chop each other to bits. Larger-than-life sculptures of these characters lack the drawings’ subversive edge, but a series of pages from the artist’s notebooks contrast scribbly, heated sketches with the cooler finished work to good effect. Through Oct. 8. (Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070.)



JAZZ NOTES UNBURIED TREASURE

By now it seems plausible to imagine that every musical performance since the age of Edison was recorded, even the most obscure and most fabled. Jazz fans have long been obsessed with the pianist Thelonious Monk’s short-lived 1957 band, which featured John Coltrane on tenor saxophone, and, while a handful of vibrant studio recordings exist, the quartet was never captured live. Or so it seemed. Then the archivist Larry Applebaum, working through tapes at the Library of Congress, stumbled upon a haphazardly marked Voice of America recording of a Carnegie Hall benefit concert. The astonishing results are now available, on “Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall” (Blue Note).

During the fifties, Coltrane played with Miles Davis and earned a reputation not only as an exceptional tenor player but also as a hard-core drug abuser. By early 1957, everything had changed: Coltrane was drug free and beginning a new job with Monk, a brilliant, if still somewhat shadowy, figure in the jazz world. A five-month gig at the Five Spot, a New York club across the street from Cooper

Union, turned things around for both men. Monk’s harmonically angular and rhythmically skewed tunes recharged a clean and focussed Coltrane. Monk burst into public consciousness, and Coltrane became the inveterate musical seeker he was to remain for the rest of his life.

From the first notes of the Carnegie Hall show—which fell near the end of the Five Spot run—the chemistry between Monk and Coltrane is palpable. Monk, riding on a restrained swing groove laid down by the drummer Shadow Wilson and the bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik, whittles his vinegary single notes and off-kilter runs down to a choice few; Coltrane, in contrast, attacks chord changes as if each note were money in the bank. His full-throated choruses on “Blue Monk” and double-time charge on the standard “Sweet and Lovely” are as exhilarating as they are prescient. Now, if only someone would turn up live recordings of the Five Spot quartet with its original bassist, the great Wilbur Ware, from the club itself.

—Steve Futterman

GALLERIES-UPDOWN

Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.

JENNY HOLZER

Holzer’s “For the City” projects poetry onto N.Y.C. monuments from dusk to midnight for eleven days. It starts this week at Rockefeller Center, from Sept. 29 to Oct. 2, then spends three nights at N.Y.U.’s Bobst Library (Oct. 3-5), and concludes at the New York Public Library on Fifth Ave. at 42nd St. (Oct. 6-9). (For more information, call Creative Time, at 212-206-6674.)

Short List

BRIAN ALFRED: Mary Boone, 745 Fifth Ave. 212-752-2929. Through Oct. 1. **DISFARMER:** Houk, 745 Fifth Ave. 212-750-7070. Through Oct. 15. **NEIL WELLIVER:** Alexandre, 41 E. 57th St. 212-755-2828. Through Oct. 22. **“BEYOND GEOGRAPHY: FORTY YEARS OF VISUAL ARTS AT THE AMERICAS SOCIETY”:** 680 Park Ave., at 68th St. 212-249-8950. Through Oct. 8.

GALLERIES-CHELSEA

MARCEL DZAMA

If William Blake, Henry Darger, and Francisco de Goya had watched a lot of violent televi-

CHRIS JORDAN

Jordan calls this series of color photographs “Intolerable Beauty: Portraits of American Mass Consumerism,” which will give you some idea of the seriousness of his intent. He works on a grand scale (one image here is ten feet wide) and to boffo effect, but too often the results are perversely decorative. A mountain of sawdust, its actual size deliberately confused, has a sly magnificence, and the all-over patterns of what look like football fields of cigarette butts, discarded diodes, or dead cell phones are momentarily mesmerizing. Still, Richard Misrach has made a similar point with less gimmickry and more feeling. Through Oct. 15. (Milo, 525 W. 25th St. 212-414-0370.)

YOSHITOMO NARA

The signature characters in Nara’s work are angry-looking moppets wearing babies’ hooded onesies, their round faces punctuated by big eyes and knitted brows. Now he has started building houses for them. There’s a packing crate with cutouts revealing figurines inside, and a life-size wooden shack whose porch one can step onto; inside is a mocked-up workroom filled with drawings of the same cutesy-grumpy kid. The white building looks good in a gallery painted floor to ceiling in marine blue, but it’s a bit of a letdown as a peepshow. Through Oct. 8. (Boesky, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9889.)

YUKEN TERUYA

Arguably the most charming objects in P.S. 1’s “Greater New York” were Teruya’s delicate trees hovering inside the paper shopping bags from which they were cut. The Japanese-born artist continues that project with “Forest Inc.,” a collection of trees carved out of mundane paper products such as McDonald’s bags and toilet-tissue rolls. The sky

"Three Seasons (Phillips, Sotheby's, Christie's)" goes upmarket, using stiff sacks from the auction-house triumvirate, while "Gap Inc." and "LVMH" explore a sliding scale of luxury, from Old Navy to Le Bon Marché (its orange and purple hues are perfect for rendering fall foliage) to Christian Dior. The idea of fashioning precious objects from detritus is an old one, but Teruya's consumerist take is as clever as his nimble paper-slicing skills. Through Oct. 15. (Bienvenu, 529 W. 20th St. 212-206-7990.)

KATHERINE WOLKOFF

Despite the pumped-up scale of her color photographs, there's something appealingly modest about Wolkoff's solo debut. The show is divided between big, dark heads seen in profile against dead white space and leafy landscapes that stop just short of being romantic clichés. The silhouette of a moss-covered branch, spooky and baroque, bridges the two groups. Wolkoff may not be wildly original, but she knows just when to pull back and let us look through her eyes. Whether the subject is a delicately detailed child's head limned by light and shadow or sunlight filtered through branches, the experience is memorable. Through Oct. 15. (Danziger, 521 W. 26th St. 212-629-6778.)

Short List

BRIAN BELOTT / ORLAN: Stux, 530 W. 25th St. 212-352-1600. Through Oct. 15. **TOM BURCKHARDT:** Golden, 539 W. 23rd St. 212-727-8304. Through Oct. 15. **PETER CAMPUS / ANTHONY MC CALL:** Tonkonow, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-255-8450. Through Oct. 1. **ADAM CVIJANOVIC:** Bellwether, 134 Tenth Ave., at 18th St. 212-929-5959. Through Oct. 15. **PHILIP-LORCA DI CORCIA:** Pace MacGill, 534 W. 25th St. 212-929-7000. Through Oct. 8. **DISFARMER:** Kasher, 521 W. 23rd St. 212-966-3978. Through Oct. 29. **SOL LE WITT:** Cooper, 534 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105. Through Oct. 15. **ROY LICHTENSTEIN:** Gagosian, 555 W. 24th St. 212-741-1111. Through Oct. 22. **LUCY MC KENZIE:** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100. Through Oct. 8. **MARTIN MULL:** Spike, 547 W. 20th St. 212-627-4100. Through Nov. 12. **DANICA PHELPS:** Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700. Through Oct. 1. **SULING WANG / STEFANO ARIENTI:** Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923. Through Oct. 22. **SUE WILLIAMS:** 303 Gallery, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-255-1121. Through Oct. 29. **MARK WYSE:** Wall-space, 547 W. 27th St. 212-594-9478. Through Oct. 15. **"CLOSING DOWN":** Bortolami Dayan, 510 W. 25th St. 212-727-2050. Through Oct. 29.

GALLERIES-DOWNTOWN

IAN BURNS

The field is overrun at the moment with artists striving to show how aesthetic naïveté and sophistication can co-exist. Burns stands out a little because his Rube Goldberg contraptions come with a kick: acerbic references to terrorism or Abu Ghraib that cut through the wide-eyed wonder of his doll-house constructions. Raw plywood is the favored material, as in "Another Day at the Office," an interactive sculpture that makes you feel like you're sitting in the middle of a giant, shoddy cuckoo clock. Bells ring, dioramic images appear, the floor moves underneath you: all the jury-rigged wires and rough edges are reminders of how life itself is an ad-hoc assembly, capable of malfunctioning at any moment. Through Oct. 15. (Spencer Brownstone, 39 Wooster St. 212-334-3455.)

JAMES HOPKINS

Sculptures constructed from household items take on laugh-inducing, surreal charm. A row of liquor bottles stand perpendicular to the floor, though the shelf they rest on has tilted a drunken thirty degrees; a played umbrella is cut into a spiderweb; a stepladder balances breathlessly on two legs. The pièce de résistance is a wall-mounted bookcase stacked with LPs, appliances, boxes, and books; a few minutes' contemplation reveals the contours of a skull carved into the humdrum collection. Further contemplation also suggests that the show's

humor belies an intense awareness of the existential terror in daily life. Through Oct. 22. (Rivington Arms, 102 Rivington St. 646-654-3213.)

BRUCE PEARSON

Pearson's paintings use eye-popping color and three-dimensional surfaces carved from Styrofoam to alternately conceal and highlight written commentary. Text grabs come from the *Times* and Kabbalah; palettes are influenced by Tibetan art and Quattrocento fresco. Through Oct. 8. (Feldman, 31 Mercer St. 212-226-3232.)

"THE ART OF 9/11"

The critic, philosopher, and curator Arthur C. Danto muses in his statement that "even the most ordinary people respond to tragedy with art." The sentiment is reflected in Leslie King-Hammond's "Prayer for the New Ancestors: Altar for the Warrior Spirits of 9/11," which mimics, with statuettes and full-page newspaper-ad memorials, Afro-Caribbean altars and the impromptu street shrines that have become our modern, public mourning sites. Jeffrey Lohn's photos of the ubiquitous post-9/11 missing-person flyers echo this, as do Mary Miss, Victoria Marshall, and Elliott Maltby's proposal for a temporary flower wreath around Ground Zero. The levelling nature of tragedy is expressed in artists' descriptions of where they were that fateful day and how they responded creatively—sometimes as unexpectedly as Cindy Sherman's "cheery on the surface, but horrific underneath" clown photographs. Through Oct. 15. (Apex Art, 291 Church St. 212-431-5270.)

DANCE

"FALL FOR DANCE"

The ten-dollar tickets and five-company evenings continue at City Center's second annual festival. The wide-ranging program is anchored by New York institutions (Paul Taylor, A.B.T., City Ballet, Alvin Ailey) and spiced up by the likes of the Span-

ish flamenco star Eva Yerbabuena and Montreal's Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. Troupes from Mexico, Argentina, and India make their New York debuts, while the Joffrey Ballet returns to its former home venue after a decadelong absence. On the final night, Charles Moulton's postmodern milestone "Precision Ball Passing," originally designed for a cast of up to eighteen, marks its twenty-fifth anniversary with a forty-eight-person performance. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Sept. 28-Oct. 2 at 8.)

JENNIFER MULLER/THE WORKS

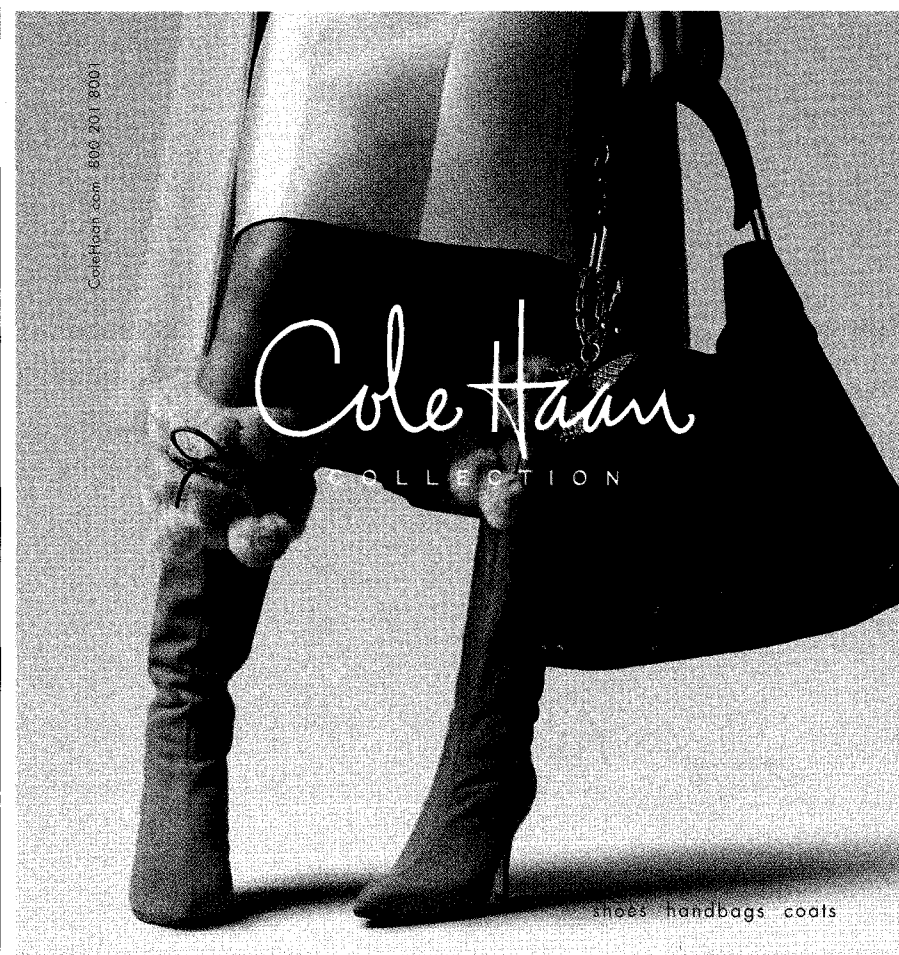
The thirty-year-old company's anniversary programs at the Joyce feature three premières: "Island," inspired by Roberto Dutesco's photographs of wild horses; "Momentum," a movement study, danced to a score by Yello; and "Sunlight & Shadow," which charts the emotional weather of mood swings. Five repertory works range across Muller's career and include both "The Spotted Owl," one of her tin-eared talking pieces, and "Speeds," the playful exercise in rates of motion with which she made her reputation. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Sept. 27 at 7, Sept. 28-30 at 8, Oct. 1 at 2 and 8, and Oct. 2 at 2 and 7:30.)

JEANINE DURNING

In the downtown choreographer's new "Out of the Kennel Into a Home," there's no place to hide and no escape. Two hyperreal cheerleaders, a tuxedoed m.c., and an unbearably tense couple frantically seek an exit. As the agitated characters shout and claw at each other, they break into intermittent dances—a sequence of fast arm flailing, a groovy hip sway, an unexpected waltz hold. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Sept. 28-Oct. 1 at 7:30.)

"CHRISTINA OLSON: AMERICAN MODEL"

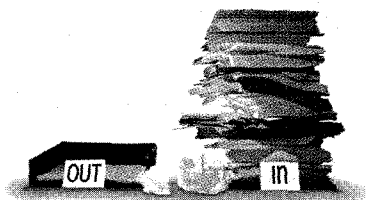
Olson, the model for Wyeth's "Christina's World," was paralyzed from the waist down and refused to use a wheelchair. The choreographer Tamar Rogoff has fashioned an absorbing evening-length solo about Olson for Claire Danes. There's



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little call for trained dancing in this piece, which features lots of pedestrian movement, but it takes a dancer's control, and Danes has got it. Olson's infirmity is rarely represented directly. Instead, it's suggested through the twist of an ankle, the curl of a hand, or a stylized spasm. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. Sept. 28-30 at 8, Oct. 1 at 4 and 8, and Oct. 2 at 4.)

"WATCHING LIGETI MOVE"

In 2001 and 2002, Christopher Wheeldon set three celebrated ballets to music by the Hungarian composer György Ligeti: "Continuum" for San Francisco Ballet and "Polyphonia" and "Morphoses" for New York City Ballet, where he is resident choreographer. As part of the Miller Theatre's Ligeti Festival, top dancers from the originating companies perform all three works as the intricate, often atonal music is played live by the Flux Quartet, Michael McGraw, and Cameron Grant. (Miller Theatre at Columbia University, 2960 Broadway, at 116th St. 212-854-7799. Sept. 28, Sept. 30, and Oct. 1 at 8.)

"AGORA"

The innovative site-specific choreographer Noémie Lafrance ("Descent," "Noir") presents a new work, set in the empty, aqua-floored McCarren Park Pool, located between Greenpoint and Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in which dancers explore the foundations of urban society. (For tickets and information, visit www.sensproduction.org. Sept. 28-Oct. 1 at 8.)

BLACK GRACE

The all-male ensemble from New Zealand continues its run at the New Victory Theatre. (209 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. Sept. 29-30 at 7, Oct. 1 at 2 and 7, and Oct. 2 at noon and 5. Through Oct. 9.)

BETH GILL AND KAKUYA OHASHI

Acting as guest curator, the choreographer Yasuko Yokoshi has chosen two works for an evening at the Kitchen. Beth Gill's "Wounded Giant" is a kind of experiment in Newtonian physics, sending the dancers across the stage and letting them come to rest as they will. The sounds produced by these human billiard balls are amplified and mixed live by Chris Peck. For his U.S. debut, the Tokyo-based Ohashi offers "Wish You Were Here," a duet on a tired theme currently popular with Japanese choreographers: the neurosis-inducing alienation of urban life. (512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Sept. 29-30 at 8.)

RICHARD DANIELS

The fifty-four-year-old dancer's taste for unhurried, sincere movement is evident in a concert of two new ensemble works, "Telling Tales" and Daniels's reimagined version of "Apollo & the Muses," set to live piano music. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. Sept. 29-Oct. 2 at 8:30.)

MAYDANCE

The group created by the twenty-five-year-old choreographer Juliana May offers three works, including one new piece, "Hinterland: The Beast Astray," and two earlier ones, "Lola's Moves" and "The Faker." The resulting retrospective of the group's three-year history reveals a strong style, melding playful, sinuous movement, often inspired by animal motion, with convulsive, irrational repetitions and transformations. (Ailey Studios, 405 W. 53th St. 212-876-5295. Sept. 30 and Oct. 1 at 8.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA

Sept. 28 at 8 and Oct. 1 at 1:30: "La Bohème," with Hei-Kyung Hong (singing the role of Mimì),

Alexandra Deshorties, Roberto Aronica, and Vladimir Chernov; Philippe Auguin conducts. ♦ Sept. 29 at 8: A revival of Elijah Moshinsky's glorious production of "Ariadne auf Naxos" includes a number of notable debuts—those of Diana Damrau (Zerbinetta), Jon Villars (Bacchus), and Christopher Maltman (Harlequin)—as well as a new departure for Violeta Urmana, whose assumption of the title role might just equal her earlier triumphs in the mezzo repertoire. The invaluable Susan Graham and Thomas Allen are also on hand; Kiril Petrenko. ♦ Sept. 30 at 8: Renée Fleming, the national diva, is the star of Massenet's "Manon," an opera beloved for its decadent, ancien-régime ambience



Lucy McKenzie's New York debut is at Metro Pictures.

and a bevy of favorite arias. The formidable Marcelo Álvarez is Des Grieux; Jesús López-Cobos. ♦ Oct. 1 at 8: Bryn Terfel, a singer both majestic and approachable, takes the title role in "Falstaff" (in the brightly restored Zeffirelli production). He will be surrounded not only by an impressive fat suit but also by a cast of superb professionals that includes Heidi Grant Murphy, Patricia Racette, Stephanie Blythe, Matthew Polenzani, and Roberto Frontali; Joseph Colaneri. ♦ Oct. 4 at 7:30: With James Levine replacing Colaneri. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA

Sept. 29 at 7:30 and Oct. 1 at 8: "Madama Butterfly," with Shu Ying Li (singing the title role), Kathryn Friest, Brandon Jovanovich (as Pinkerton), and Jake Gardner; Ari Peltó conducts. ♦ Sept. 30 at 8 and Oct. 2 at 1:30: Despite their utterly different vocal styles, the English music-theatre star Michael Ball and the young American bass Kevin Burdette (singing roles based on James McNeill Whistler and Oscar Wilde, respectively) make a fine pair in Tazewell Thompson's daffy production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Patience," which also features Tonna Miller (as the milkmaid Patience) and Myrna Paris (a sympathetic Lady Jane, the show's Margaret Dumont role); Gary Thor Wedow keeps things moving. ♦ Oct. 1 at 1:30 and Oct. 4 at 7:30: Rossini's one-act "Il Viaggio a

Reims" is at once a hymn to the French royal family, a witty pre-Monty Python lampoon of rich toffs, and a vocal display piece of enormous charm. It returns to the house via James Robinson's production, which features Maria Kanyova, Allyson McHardy, Javier Abreu, and Eduardo Chama in its large cast of soloists; George Manahan. (New York State Theatre. 212-721-6500.)

ONE WORLD SYMPHONY

Sung Jin Hong, an enterprising young conductor, and his group of hungry young musicians (who play for little or no pay) have a go at "Il Trovatore," semi-staged by Will Bryan. (Church of St. Anne and the Holy Trinity, 157 Montague St., Brooklyn. Sept. 30 at 8. ♦ St. Luke's Lutheran Church, Eighth Ave. at 46th St. Oct. 1 at 8. Tickets at the door.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

The Philharmonic is offering performances of four works by Elliott Carter this year—just enough to give a respectful nod to the doyen of New York composers and to offer inquisitive listeners a taste of what they've been missing. First off is the "Holiday Overture," which Lorin Maazel will conduct; written to celebrate the Allied Liberation of Paris, it's a rambunctiously complex takeoff on Copland's populist style. The program continues with music by Mozart (the Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, with Jonathan Biss) and Strauss ("Death and Transfiguration" and "The Dance of the Seven Veils," from "Salome"). (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Sept. 29 at 7:30, Sept. 30 at 2, and Oct. 1 at 8. ♦ Note: Charles Zachary Bornstein will lecture on Carter's music, with the composer in attendance, on Sept. 28 at 6 at the Walter Reade Theatre.)

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Colin Davis's concerts with the venerable London group, a welcome annual event, begin the Great Performers series at Lincoln Center. Sept. 28 at 8: Davis conducts Verdi's Requiem, with the soloists Anne Schwanewilms, Ildiko Komlosi, Stuart Neill, and Orlin Anastassov backed up by the London Symphony Chorus. ♦ Sept. 30 at 8: Music by Sibelius—one of Davis's specialties—occupies the next program, which begins with the tone poem "Pohjola's Daughter" and concludes with the composer's epic first masterwork, "Kullervo" (featuring the mezzo-soprano Monica Groop and the baritone Raimo Laukka). ♦ Oct. 2 at 3: The series concludes with performances of two great English symphonies, Vaughan Williams's Sixth and Walton's First. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500.)

ST. PETERSBURG PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Carnegie Hall begins its season with a three-concert series featuring Yuri Temirkanov's lean and driven ensemble. Sept. 29 at 7: The opening-night gala, an evening of Rachmaninoff (the Third Piano Concerto, which should be forcefully rendered by Yefim Bronfman) and Tchaikovsky (the Fifth Symphony). ♦ Sept. 30 at 8: A non-Russian program of Weber, Dvořák (the Violin Concerto, with Julia Fischer), and Sibelius (the Symphony No. 2 in D Major). ♦ Oct. 1 at 8: Temirkanov, a Russian traditionalist, shows his range with the Georgian composer Giya Kancheli's atmospheric "Al Niente" and a very German Second Symphony, Brahms's. (212-247-7800.)

NEW YORK COLLEGIUM:

"VENICE CIRCA 1600"

Andrew Parrott, the early-music group's ambitious director, will use the vaulting spaces of St. Bartholomew's Church to showcase the music of one of La Serenissima's favorite sons, Giovanni Gabrieli, who composed his antiphonal works for voices

LUCY MC KENZIE, "LUCY AND PAULINA IN THE MOSCOW METRO (PLOSCHAD REVOLUTSIJ)" (2003)

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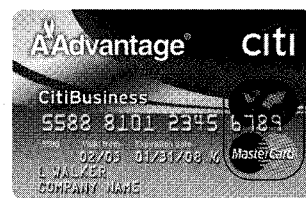
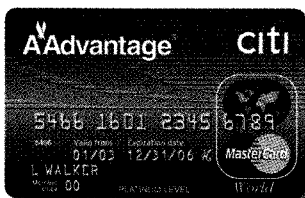


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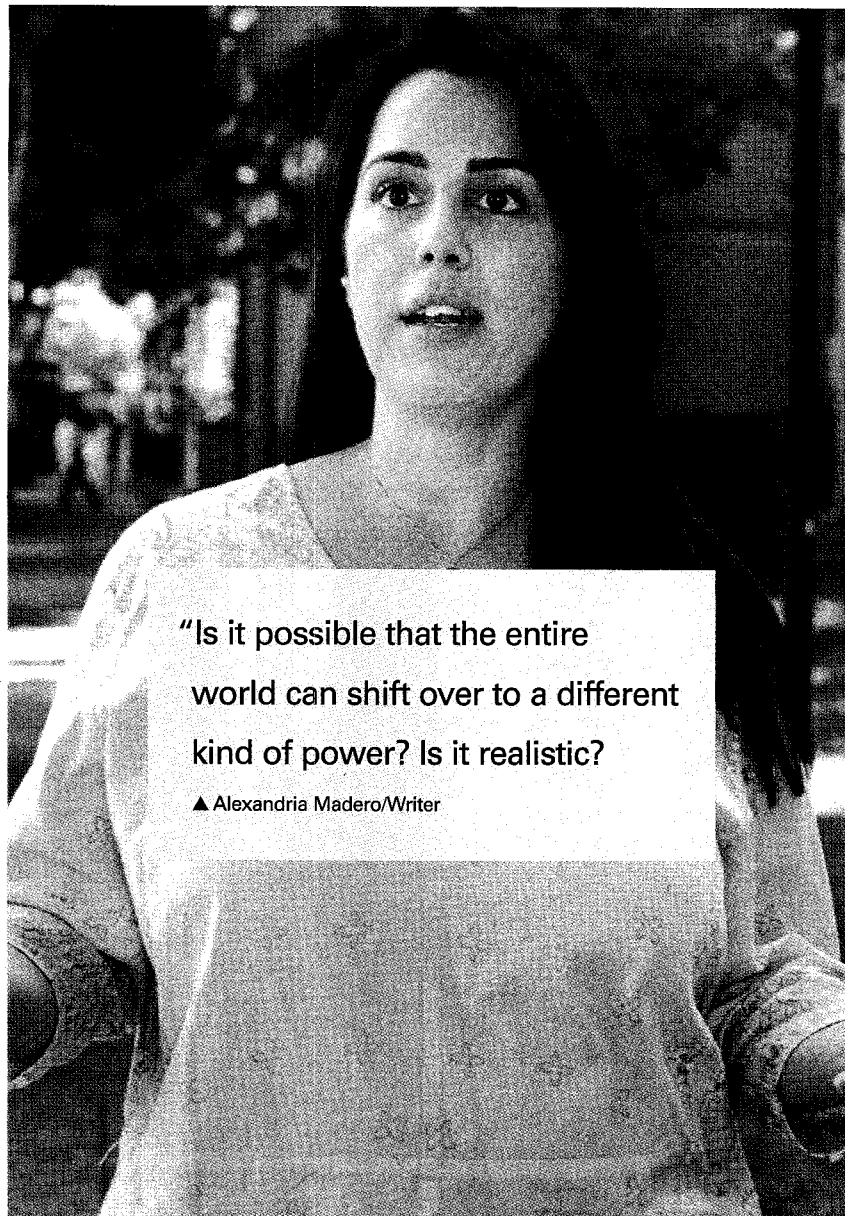
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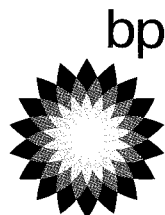
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and brass for the echoing expanse of St. Mark's Basilica. The singers include the countertenor Matthew White and the baritone Thomas Meglioranza. (Park Ave. at 50th St. 212-717-9246. Sept. 30 at 8.)

RECITALS

NEW YORK PHILOMUSICA

Music by Brahms—the evergreen Trio for Violin, Horn, and Piano—anchors a program featuring Janáček's "Concertino" and clarinet quintets by Michael Berkeley (an American premiere) and Iain Hamilton. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-580-9933. Sept. 29 at 8.)

THE LIGETI ÉTUDES

György Ligeti continues to create some of the most daring and original music of our time, never forgetting that the purpose of music is to amaze and delight. His solo-piano Études, quickly entering the repertory, are a case in point. Taka Kigawa, a pianist who loves to rise to a challenge, is a faculty member at the Greenwich House Music School who is in the middle of a three-concert survey of the complete set; he plays Ligeti's Book I, along with another landmark of the genre, Chopin's first set of Études, Op. 10. (Renee Weiler Concert Hall, Greenwich House Music School, 46 Barrow St. Sept. 30 at 8. Tickets at the door.)

MUSIC AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

Daniel Hope, who faithfully tends the flame of Beethoven as the violinist of the Beaux Arts Trio, strikes out on his own with "East Meets West," a program of Spanish, Asian, and Asian-influenced music (such as Ravel's "Tzigane" and Takemitsu's "Distance de Fée") in collaboration with the sitar player Gaurav Mazumdar, among others. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. Oct. 1 at 8.)

THE QUEEN'S CHAMBER BAND

The harpsichordist Elaine Comparone and her early-music group offer "Benjamin Franklin's Musical World," a selection of works (by Gluck, Handel, J. C. Bach, and Scots balladeers) that the pleasure-loving Founding Father may have heard during his European travels. (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Oct. 2 at 2.)

MUSIC BY BRAHMS AND RICHARD WILSON

Wilson, a pianist and a faculty composer at Vassar, teams up with three fine musicians—the mezzo-soprano Mary Nessinger, the violinist Rolf Schulte, and the cellist Sophie Shao—to offer works by the German master (including the Trio in B Major, Op. 8) and himself (the world premiere of a setting of Elizabeth Bishop's "Visits to St. Elizabeth's"). (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. Oct. 2 at 3.)

"MUSIC BEFORE 1800" SERIES: LIONHEART

The impresario Louise Basbas, a reliable importer of top early-music groups to an eager city, begins her new season with a concert by the renowned male vocal sextet, who offer sixteenth-century Spanish sacred music by Guerrero and Morales. (Corpus Christi Church, 529 W. 121st St. 212-666-9266. Oct. 2 at 4.)

MOVIES OPENING

CAPOTE

Bennett Miller directed this bio-pic, about Truman Capote's research for the writing of "In Cold Blood." Philip Seymour Hoffman plays the lead. With Catherine Keener, Clifton Collins, Jr., and Chris Cooper. Opening Sept. 30. (In wide release.)

FORTY SHADES OF BLUE

Rip Torn stars as an egotistical Memphis music producer whose marriage to a young Russian beauty (Dina Korzun) is threatened by the arrival of his estranged son (Darren Burrows). Directed by Ira Sachs. Opening Sept. 28. (Film Forum.)

GOING SHOPPING

In Henry Jaglom's latest drama, the story of a boutique owner who must save her business is

interspersed with women's testimonials about the role of shopping in their lives. With Victoria Foyt and Rob Morrow. Opening Sept. 30. (Angelika Film Center and Metro Twin.)

THE GREATEST GAME EVER PLAYED

Bill Paxton directed this sports drama based on the true story of an amateur golfer (Shia LaBeouf) who beat the British champ Harry Vardon (Stephen Dillane) at the U.S. Open in 1913. Opening Sept. 30. (In wide release.)

INTO THE BLUE

A thriller directed by John Stockwell in which a group of divers discover a trove of drugs and vow to keep the secret among themselves. With Paul Walker and Jessica Alba. Opening Sept. 30. (In wide release.)

LITTLE MANHATTAN

Mark Levin directed this romantic comedy, in which two eleven-year-olds fall in love in New York City. Opening Sept. 30. (In wide release.)

MIRRORMASK

A fantasy drama in which a girl who works for her family's circus finds herself in a dream world from which she may not be able to escape. Directed by Dave McKean. Opening Sept. 30. (In wide release.)

THE PRIZE WINNER OF DEFIANCE, OHIO

A drama based on the story of a devoted mother of ten (Julianne Moore) who entered jingle-writing contests to make ends meet in the nineteen-fifties. With Woody Harrelson and Laura Dern. Directed by Jane Anderson. Opening Sept. 30. (In wide release.)

SERENITY

An adaptation of Joss Whedon's TV show "Firefly," set five hundred years in the future, about the adventures of the crew of an intergalactic transport ship. Opening Sept. 30. (In wide release.)

THE WAR WITHIN

A Pakistani student moves from Paris to the U.S. to embark on a terrorist mission; when the mission is discovered and he eludes capture, he hides out with a friend living the American Dream in New Jersey. Directed by Joseph Castelo. Opening Sept. 30. (Sunshine Cinema.)

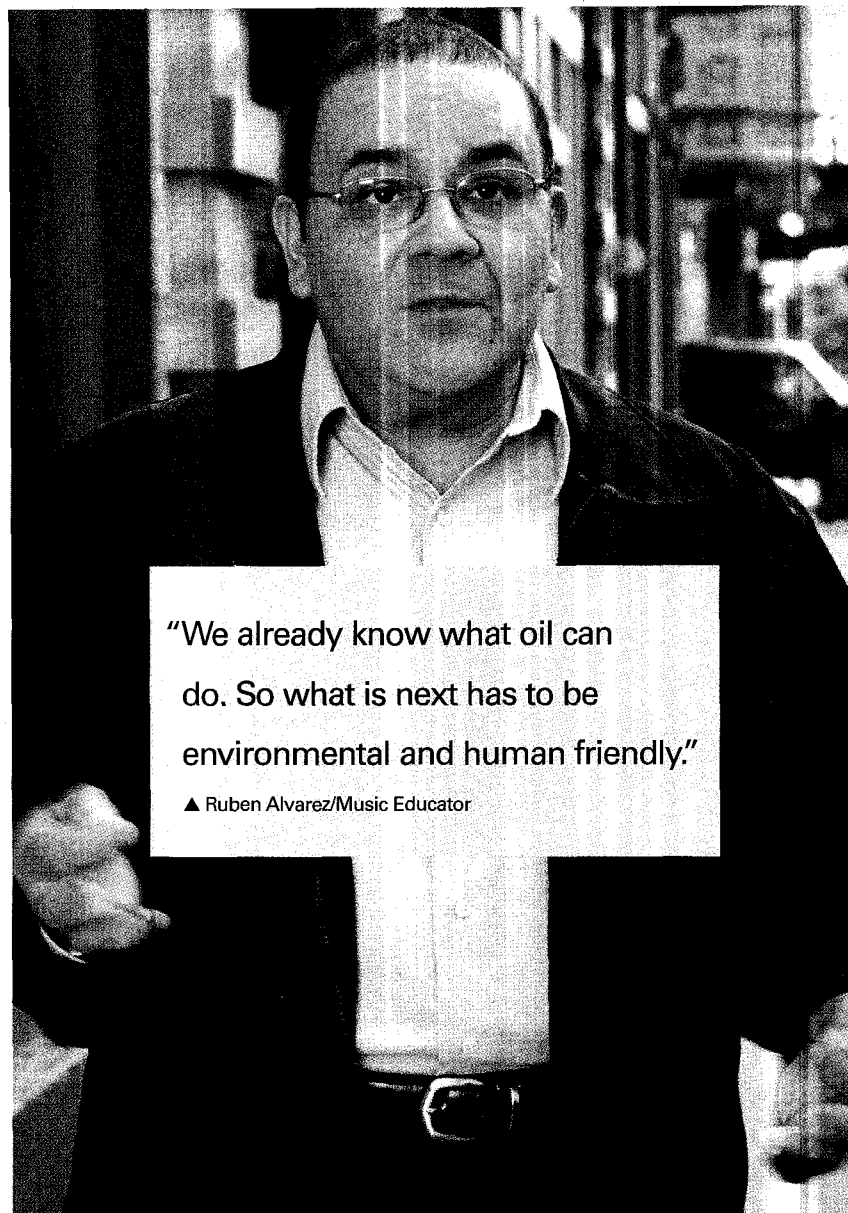
NOW PLAYING

THE CLOSET

This satisfyingly dry comedy from 2001, written and directed by Francis Veber (who wrote "La Cage aux Folles"), is about a bland accountant (Daniel Auteuil) who's about to be let go from a condom-manufacturing company. He's on the brink of suicide when his savvy next-door neighbor (Michel Aumont) comes up with the idea that if the company director (Jean Rochefort) thinks that Auteuil is gay he won't fire him for fear that a scandal will alienate his homosexual clientele. As news of racy (doctored) photographs filters through the office, the hero's sudden gayness makes him fascinating. The brilliance in the concept is that he behaves the way he always has—he just brings out everyone else's expectations of gay behavior. The actors comprise a French comedy reunion; the cast includes Michèle Laroque ("The Hairdresser's Husband"), Thierry Lhermitte ("The Dinner Game"), and Gérard Depardieu. They all come through for Veber, especially Depardieu as a personnel manager and rugby coach and Lhermitte as his dapper pal, who goads Depardieu into developing a friendship with Auteuil that ends up shaking the macho jock's nonchalance. Depardieu gets more hilarious and touching the more he gets dazed and confused. In French.—*Michael Sragow* (Florence Gould Hall; Oct. 4.)

THE CONSTANT GARDENER

A frenzied adaptation of a John le Carré novel, if that is not a contradiction in terms. Ralph Fiennes plays a refined but bumbling British diplomat who arrives in Kenya with his belligerent new wife (Rachel Weisz). Impatient with niceties, she goes after the pharmaceutical giants, who are testing a new drug and covering up the results. When she dies, apparently in an accident, her loving and uncomprehending husband is forced

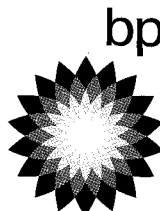


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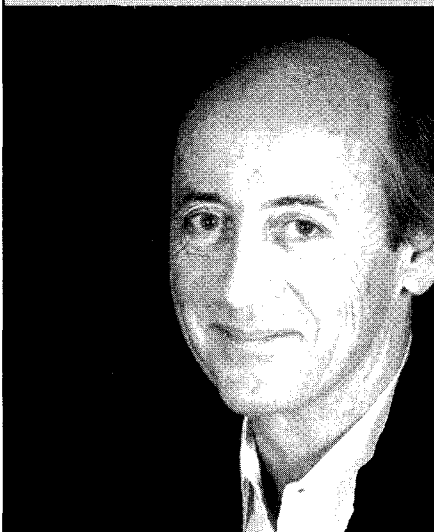


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Introduction by Bill Murray

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to retrace her steps and rekindle some of her fire. The movie is a curious, roiling mix of genres that stirs marital romance into a heated indictment of a vast, conspiratorial crime. Thriller junkies will find it tempting but fragmentary; how is one supposed to take a car chase that ends with both drivers getting out for a chat? The director is Fernando Meirelles, who has imported the busy style of his last picture, "City of God," and given it an extra jolt; the images of Africa, forever in hot pursuit of one another, leave you not so much exhilarated as exhausted, long before the story is done. With Danny Huston and a mischievous Bill Nighy. —*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 9/5/05.) (In wide release.)

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

As Jonathan Safran Foer, the repressed Jewish novelist in the making who goes in search of his roots in Ukraine, Elijah Wood is inhumanly neat and wears big glasses in front of his extraordinary blue eyes. Those glasses don't seem part of his necessary equipment—he looks like Clark Kent. Many things are off in Liev Schreiber's first directorial effort, an adaptation of the novel by Foer (who named the main character after himself). The movie veers from slapstick to tragedy to shimmering wonder-of-life euphoria, not always successfully, and Schreiber can't bring the material to a satisfying dramatic climax. But there are affecting moments, too, as Jonathan wanders through the countryside with two unreliable guides from Odessa—Alex (Eugene Hutz), an Americanophile lout, and his irascible grandfather (Boris Leskin), who has buried roots of his own. Shot in Prague and its environs, doubling for Ukraine. —*David Denby* (In wide release.)

THE EXORCISM OF EMILY ROSE

A priest (Tom Wilkinson) has been charged with criminal negligence for allowing a girl to die while he performed an exorcism on her. The frame of the movie consists of an austere photograph of court trial and a high-minded debate between, on one side, science and medicine and, on the other, faith and a belief in demons. It's a Bush-era debate—guess which side wins? We see flashbacks, in trashy horror-film style (clanking and whooshing soundtrack, creaking doors, dishes mysteriously falling off tables), to the anguish of a college girl (Jennifer Carpenter), who gets assaulted and torn apart by demons. In effect, for much of the film we are watching the torture of a young woman. Laura Linney and Campbell Scott huff and puff as opposing lawyers. Directed by Scott Derrickson. —*D.D.* (In wide release.)

THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN

Andy Stitzer (Steve Carell), whose Dickensian moniker suggests "stiff," "zipper," and "stitched," got a bad start as a teen-ager and is now so afraid of women he won't go near them. Andy's fellow-workers at a San Fernando Valley electronics store, played by Seth Rogen, Romany Malco, and Paul Rudd, are full of stupid schemes to help him, but they're even more screwed up in their relations with women than he is. Much of the comedy is coarse, obvious, and foulmouthed, but, within the broad license that the writer-director Judd Apatow allows himself, he works with considerable delicacy and a surprising sense of detail. Elizabeth Banks and Leslie Mann have good bits as predatory women who terrify the hero; Jane Lynch, as Andy's boss, breaks into a tender Guatemalan love song; and Catherine Keener, as a real woman (that is, loving, and also trouble), ends the infantile jokes and turns the movie into a romance. Carell collaborated on the script with Apatow. —*D.D.* (9/12/05) (In wide release.)

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

David Cronenberg's latest is a noirish story about a seemingly settled Indiana man, Tom Stall (Viggo Mortensen), who displays an unsuspected talent for violence when a couple of killers invade the café he runs in a small town. Soon after, a mobster from Philadelphia with a glass eye (Ed Harris) shows up and addresses Tom as "Joey." Is some sort of buried past taking over Tom's life? The movie asks us to believe that one man can carry two entirely different personalities within

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK THE GREAT GÉRARD

He has played louts, peasants, poseurs, and studs; Danton, Balzac, and Rodin; Jean Valjean and the Count of Monte Cristo. For over thirty years, in more than a hundred films, Gérard Depardieu has dominated French movies more thoroughly than any actor has ever dominated a nation's cinema. Thick-bodied yet volatile, with a long nose, a long jaw squared at the base, and



melancholy eyes, this unhandsome yet beautiful man tears up the screen as a ruffian and petty criminal, yet he has reflective and delicate moments that have made him appealing to such panjandrums of the Parisian avant-garde as Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras (he also helped get their films financed). As part of its Tuesday film series, the Alliance Française is showing a selection of Depardieu's work at Florence Gould Hall in October and November, including his performances as a priest in "Sous le Soleil de Satan," from 1987, a farmer in "Jean de Florette," from 1986, and as Marguerite Duras's intellectual boy toy in "Le Camion," from 1977.

—*David Denby*

him and still be as sane as daylight. Cronenberg's direction, mirroring the split in Tom, is alternately measured and frighteningly explosive, and, as always, he gives the movie a nasty underlay of sexual perversity. With Maria Bello, Ashton Holmes, and, as still another Philadelphia mobster, William Hurt, who seems to be having a ball.—D.D. (In wide release.)

JUST LIKE HEAVEN

Reese Witherspoon is clever and sprightly in this pseudo-romantic comedy about a woman in a coma who's suspended between life and the afterlife. Mark Ruffalo plays a lonely architect who is haunted by her when he sublets her apartment. The typical Odd Couple high jinks happily ensue, until the film turns disastrously into a right-to-life-support polemic. The director Mark Waters, who did nice work on "Freaky Friday" and "Mean Girls," moves the film along with flair, but the uneasy subtext (does anyone want to see a comedy about the Terri Schiavo case?) drains the fun out of it.—Bruce Diones (In wide release.)

LORD OF WAR

A raffish, visually exciting entertainment about the rise of an arms dealer. Nicolas Cage, speaking in a new, self-confident voice, is Yuri Orlov, a Ukrainian-born hustler who grew up in Brighton Beach (he pretends to be a Jew when it's useful) and who then claws his way to the top of a sordid trade. Yuri easily bribes Soviet-made weaponry out of the hands of the military and then sells the guns and grenades to crumb-bum Third World dictators. He has a stake in African civil strife, a grotesque situation that the writer-director Andrew Niccol plays as exuberant black comedy. The movie is glib and over-explicit but also, in its cynical way, honest and morally outraged. With Bridget Moynahan as Yuri's fantasy bride, Jared Leto as his hysterical brother, and Ian Holm as a "moral" arms dealer—he sells to the good guys rather than to the dictators.—D.D. (9/26/05) (In wide release.)

MARCH OF THE PENGUINS

This hugely successful French documentary, directed by Luc Jacquet, yields itself so readily to anthropomorphic readings that it's hard to say where bird ends and man begins. As the emperor penguins shuffle across the terrain to their mating ground with bowed shoulders, they look, from the rear, like shtetl Jews heading off to shul. Flopping to their bellies for greater speed, they could be kids taking a wave on a surfboard. After they mate, the parents take care of the children with a selfless devotion that would not seem out of place in lacrosse-mom precincts like Glen Cove or Montclair. Yet here's the miracle: the extreme coldness and clarity of the air, and the translucent blues and searing whites of the landscape, lend the ritual, however mundane, familial, and instinct-driven, an aspect of eternal splendor. One of the most touching and eye-ravishing documentaries ever made.—D.D. (9/12/05) (In wide release.)

OLIVER TWIST

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

PROOF

Catherine (Gwyneth Paltrow) appears to have inherited the mathematical gifts of her father, Robert (Anthony Hopkins). The question is, has he also handed down his fragility of mind? The kinship of brilliance and madness is not exactly the freshest topic for investigation, and John Madden's film, adapted from David Auburn's play, doesn't bring much to the party. There is suspense, of a kind, when a new mathematical proof of startling ambition—and uncertain provenance—is found in Robert's desk after his death, but apart from that the movie unfolds in a mood of worrisome gloominess. When Catherine's non-geeky sister Claire (Hope Davis) arrives from New York for the funeral, we are meant to find her mean and brittle, but there is much to be said for her exasperation, and, as is so often the case, what struck theatre audiences as smart and provoking winds up on-screen looking smug. With Jake Gyllenhaal as a math graduate and part-time drummer, who would be well advised not to give up his day job.—A.L. (9/19/05) (In wide release.)

ROLL BOUNCE

In Chicago in 1978, Xavier (X) Smith (Bow Wow) and his crew of South Side roller-demons compete in a skate-off challenge against the North Side idol Sweetness (Wesley Jonathan) and his polyester posse. The director, Malcolm D. Lee, offers a nostalgic view of the village that it takes to raise a child and the hard work needed to keep a family together. A pair of tough and tender scenes between X and his widowed father, Curtis (Chi McBride), are so tear-jerkingly effective that they render the skating contest anticlimactic. Yet, for a film that celebrates the value of work, there's no sense of the self-imposed discipline of rehearsal required to make it to the top. Endearing actors (including Mike Epps and Charlie Murphy as wisecracking trash collectors), a funny script, and a mood of bittersweet sentiment are undercut by simplistic resolutions.—Richard Brody (In wide release.)

THUMBSUCKER

Justin (Lou Pucci), a pale, slender seventeen-year-old, withdraws from his dissatisfied mom (Tilda Swinton), his inarticulate, self-disappointed father (Vincent D'Onofrio), and just about everyone at school by hoisting his thumb and dreaming. Mike Mills, working with Walter Kirn's 1999 novel, has contributed yet another movie to the coming-of-age genre, but Mills's gentle touch brings out the humor and hidden tensions in the undramatic material. Vince Vaughn, Keanu Reeves, and Benjamin Bratt give amusing performances as stumbling adults who don't provide Justin with much in the way of role models.—D.D. (9/26/05) (In wide release.)

TIM BURTON'S CORPSE BRIDE

Tim Burton returns with another stop-motion animation movie that's both beautiful and a bit disturbing to watch. The nineteenth-century period piece, about a shy and clumsy pianist (voiced by Johnny Depp) who accidentally becomes engaged to a dead woman (Helena Bonham Carter) long-

ing for love, is darkly designed in script and in production, and thoroughly intriguing. After the Corpse Bride drags the pianist to the spectacularly colorful Land of the Dead, the remainder of the film, about his escape from the underworld, is both poignant and exciting. A gothic comedy about Victorian repression may not be the most welcoming of kids' fare, but there's a verve and effervescence to the movie that plays like a musical version of an Edgar Allan Poe story, and Danny Elfman's fanciful score is a blast. Co-directed by Mike Johnson.—B.D. (In wide release.)

WHISKY GALORE

The only amusing famine in movie history is the whiskey famine on the mythical Scottish island of Todday; the wartime ration of whiskey has run out, and the island is devastated by drought. Then a ship bound for the United States with fifty thousand cases of Scotch is wrecked on the shore, and the parched islanders take on the sweet task of salvage. Alexander Mackendrick directed this convivial little classic from 1949, alternately titled "Tight Little Island," based on Compton Mackenzie's novel "Whisky Galore." Photographed on Barra, the Hebrides.—Pauline Kael (Museum of Modern Art; Sept. 29.)

THE WEEPING MEADOW

Another grand and glacial enterprise from the veteran Greek director Theo Angelopoulos. The action (though that's not the first word that springs to mind) begins in 1919, with a band of Greek refugees returning to Thessalonika. From here on, their lives seem little better than provisional; indeed, they seem as unsurprised to find their houses under water, after a flood, as they are by the regular gusts of snow and rain that beat upon the clay-colored landscape. Whether the actors are anything other than figures in it—whether the director honestly believes in the ability, or even the right, of performance to do more than flavor a film—is open to question, and viewers of meagre patience are unlikely to last the course. Chrono-

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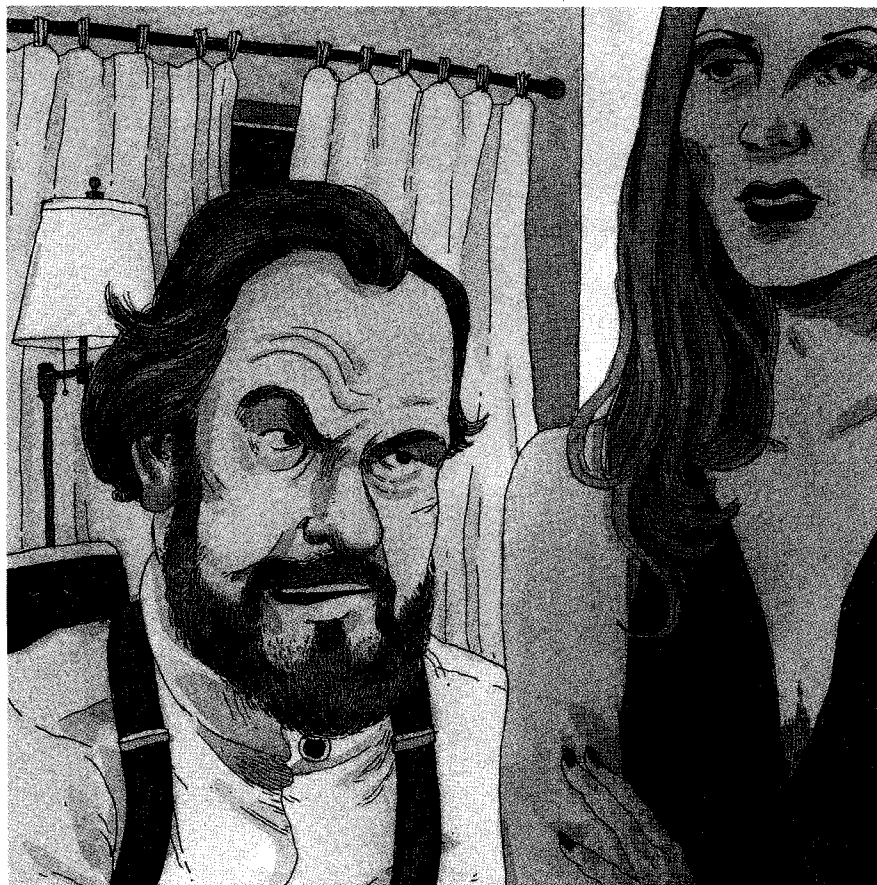
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logically, the movie stretches through the Second World War and beyond, although history is not so much confronted as glimpsed in doorways or overheard in the dark. Through it wanders a group of travelling musicians, and, if anything binds the film together, it is the thread of their melancholy tunes. In Greek.—A.L. (9/19/05) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

Also Playing

BALZAC AND THE LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS: Cinema Village. **DEAR WENDY:** Angelika Film Center. **FLIGHTPLAN:** In wide release. **GRIZZLY MAN:** In wide release (8/8 & 15/05). **MUSIC FROM THE INSIDE OUT:** Cinema Village. **RED EYE:** In wide release (9/12/05). **THE THING ABOUT MY FOLKS:** In wide release. **WEDDING CRASHERS:** In wide release (7/25/05).



Ira Sachs's *"Forty Shades of Blue,"* with Rip Torn and Dina Korzun, opens Sept. 28.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"Logos Film Lectures." Oct. 1 at 1: "Monty Python's Life of Brian" (1979, Terry Jones), followed by a talk with Ian Williams.

BAM ROSE CINEMAS

30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—Through Oct. 6: "Double Dutch." Sept. 28 at 6:50 and 9:15: "Monte Walsh" (1970, William Fraker). ♦ Sept. 29 at 6:50 and 9:15: "Lyrical Nitrate" (1991, Peter Delpout; in Dutch) and "Forbidden Quest" (1993, Delpout; in Dutch). ♦ "BAM Cinématek Favorites." Sept. 30 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Stardust Memories" (1980, Woody Allen). ♦ Oct. 3-4 at 6:50 and 9:15: "Gunman's Walk" (1958, Phil Karlson). ♦ "Brooklyn Digifest." Oct. 1 at 2 and Oct. 2 at 9:30: A program of short films. ♦ Oct. 1 at 4:30: "You Are Alone" (2005, Gorman Bechard). ♦ Oct. 1

at 6:50 and Oct. 2 at 2: "A Sidewalk Astronomer" (2005, Jeffrey Fox Jacobs). ♦ Oct. 1 at 9:30: "Fade" (2005, Franklyn Strachan). ♦ Oct. 2 at 4:30: "Rockaway" (2005, Mark Street). ♦ Oct. 2 at 6:50: "A Tale of Two Pizzas" (2003, Vincent Sassone).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. Sept. 28-29 at 1: "I Am Cuba: The Siberian Mammoth" (2004, Vicente Ferraz; in Portuguese). ♦ Sept. 28-29 at 2:45, 5:20, and 8: "I Am Cuba" (1964, Mikhail Kalatozov; in Russian, Spanish, and English). ♦ Sept. 30-Oct. 4 at 2, 5:30, and 8:30: "Once Upon a Time in the West" (1968, Sergio Leone).

FLORENCE GOULD HALL

55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—"Cinéma Tuesdays." Oct. 4 at 12:30, 4, and 7: "The Closet" (†).

A special screening marking the centenary of the birth of the director Michael Powell. Sept. 30 at 6: "The Red Shoes" (1948, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger), introduced by Martin Scorsese and Thelma Schoonmaker. ♦ "Early Autumn: Masterworks of Japanese Cinema from the National Film Center, Tokyo." All films are in Japanese. Oct. 1 at 2: "I'll Buy You" (1956, Masaki Kobayashi). ♦ Oct. 1 at 4:30: "Not Long After Leaving Shingawa" (1957, Yuzo Kawashima). ♦ Oct. 1 at 6:45: "Tears on the Lion's Mane" (1962, Masahiro Shinoda). ♦ Oct. 1 at 8:45: "Ghost Story of Yotsuya" (1959, Nobuo Nakagawa). ♦ Oct. 2 at 2: "A Story Written with Water" (1965, Yoshishige Yoshida). ♦ Oct. 2 at 4:30: "The Life and Opinions of Masseur Ichi" (1962, Kenji Misumi). ♦ Oct. 3 at 6: "Irezumi" (1966, Yasuzo Masumura). ♦ Oct. 3 at 8: "A Certain Killer" (1967, Kazuo Mori).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Repertory nights. Sept. 30-Oct. 1 at 7:30 and Oct. 2 at 6:30: "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" (1972, Werner Herzog; in German). ♦ Through Nov. 13: "Some Like It Wilder: The Complete Billy Wilder." Oct. 1 at 2: "The Front Page" (1974). ♦ Oct. 1 at 4 and Oct. 2 at 4:30: "The Apartment" (1960). ♦ Oct. 2 at 2: "Irma la Douce" (1963).

THE NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL

Lincoln Center (212-875-5050)—Most screenings will be held at Alice Tully Hall. See www.filmlinc.com for details. Sept. 28 at 6: "Capote" (2005, Bennett Miller). ♦ Sept. 28 at 9: "The Squid and the Whale" (2005, Noah Baumbach). ♦ Sept. 29 at 6 and Oct. 1 at 3:30: "Something Like Happiness" (2005, Bohdan Sláma; in Czech). ♦ Sept. 29 at 9: "I Am" (2005, Dorota Kedzierzawska; in Polish). ♦ Sept. 30 at 6 and Oct. 2 at 8:30: "Sympathy for Lady Vengeance" (2005, Park Chanwook; in Korean). ♦ Sept. 30 at 9 and Oct. 1 at noon: "Manderlay" (2005, Lars von Trier). ♦ Oct. 1 at 6:15 and Oct. 2 at 3:15: "Tale of Cinema" (2005, Hong Sang-soo; in Korean). ♦ Oct. 1 at 9 and Oct. 2 at noon: "Breakfast on Pluto" (2005, Neil Jordan). ♦ Oct. 1 at midnight: "Haze" (2005, Shinya Tsukamoto; in Japanese). ♦ Oct. 2 at 6: "Through the Forest" (2005, Jean-Paul Civeyrac; in French). ♦ Oct. 3 at 6 and Oct. 4 at 9: "The President's Last Bang" (2005, Im Sang-soo; in Korean). ♦ Oct. 3 at 9 and Oct. 4 at 6: "Who's Camus Anyway?" (2005, Mitsuo Yanagimachi; in Japanese). ♦ Sidebar to the New York Film Festival: "The Beauty of the Everyday: Japan's Shochiku Company at 110." All films are in Japanese. Sept. 28 at 2:30 and 7:40: "A Star Athlete" (1937, Hiroshi Shimizu). ♦ Sept. 28 at 4 at 9:10: "The Lights of Asakusa" (1937, Yasujiro Shimazu). ♦ Sept. 28 at 6: "Our Neighbor Miss Yae" (1934, Shimazu). ♦ Sept. 29 at 1:45 and 6:15: "The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums" (1939, Kenji Mizoguchi). ♦ Sept. 29 at 4:30: "Ornamental Hairpin" (1941, Shimizu). ♦ Sept. 29 at 9: "Woman of the Mist" (1936, Heinosuke Gosho). ♦ Sept. 30 at 2:45: "The Army" (1944, Kieseike Kinoshita). ♦ Sept. 30 at 4:30 and Oct. 3 at 8:30: "A Ball at the Anjo House" (1947, Kozaburo Yoshimura). ♦ Sept. 30 at 6:30 and Oct. 3 at 2: "The Loyal 47 Ronin" (1941, Kenji Mizoguchi). ♦ A special presentation of the festival: "Views from the Avant-Garde." Oct. 1 at 10 A.M.: "A Trip to the Louvre" (2004, Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet; in French). ♦ Oct. 1 at noon: "The Daily Planet," a program of short films (2005). ♦ Oct. 1 at 2:15: "David Gatten's Secret History of the Dividing Line," a program of short films (1999-2004). ♦ Oct. 1 at 5:30: "The Terrestrial Observatory," a program of short films (1968-2005). ♦ Oct. 1 at 8:30: "Blue Movie" (1969, Andy Warhol). ♦ Oct. 2 at 12:30: "Papa, Thanksgiving 1979 & Burials" (1979-81, Allen Ross). ♦ Oct. 2 at 2:30: "Larry Gottheim," a program of short films (1969-2005). ♦ Oct. 2 at 5:30: "Manual Override," a program of short films (2005). ♦ Oct. 2 at 8: "Shadowhunger," a program of short films (2005). ♦ Oct. 2 at 10: "Heinz Emigholz," a program of short films (1996-2005).

SUNSHINE CINEMA

143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—Midnight movies. Sept. 30-Oct. 1: "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" (1971, Mel Stuart).

IFC CENTER

323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"Weekend Classics." Sept. 30-Oct. 2 at noon: "The Soft Skin" (1964, François Truffaut; in French). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." Sept. 30-Oct. 1: "Pink Floyd the Wall" (1982, Alan Parker).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—Through Oct. 8: "Swoon: Ten Years of Killer Films." Sept. 28 at 8 and Oct. 2 at 5: "Kids" (1995, Larry Clark). ♦ Sept. 29 at 6: "A Dirty Shame" (2004, John Waters). ♦ Sept. 29 at 8:15 and Oct. 2 at 2: "Happiness" (1998, Todd Solondz). ♦ Oct. 1 at 2: A program of short films, including "Dottie Gets Spanked" (1993, Todd Haynes). ♦ Oct. 1 at 4: "Far from Heaven" (2002, Haynes). ♦ Oct. 1 at 6:30: "Poison" (1991, Haynes). ♦ Oct. 1 at 8:30: "Velvet Goldmine" (1998, Haynes). ♦ Oct. 3 at 6:30: "Office Killer" (1997, Cindy Sherman). ♦ Oct. 3 at 8:30: "Boys Don't Cry" (1999, Kimberly Peirce). ♦ The films of Ross McElwee. Sept. 28 at 8:30: "Six O'Clock News" (1996). ♦ "Alexander Mackendrick: Auteur and Academic." Sept. 29 at 6: "Whisky Galore" (†). ♦ Sept. 29 at 8: "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957). ♦ Sept. 30 at 6: "The Man in the White Suit" (1951). ♦

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1909

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1910

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1925

First supercharged engine

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1935

First all-steel body construction

First diesel-powered car

1945

1951

First three-point seat belt

1965

1970

An early patent for the air bag

Promoted antilock brakes

1990

First pop-up rollover bar

1995

Electronic Stability Program

first introduced

First generation M-Class

introduced

2000

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THALIA THEATRE

Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—“Current Cinema.” Oct. 2 at 4:45 and Oct. 4 at 8: “Hero” (2002, Zhang Yimou; in Mandarin). ♦ “Thalia Film Classics.” Oct. 2 at 7 and Oct. 4 at 6: “East of Eden” (1955, Elia Kazan).

WALTER READE THEATRE

Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—See New York Film Festival.

READINGS AND TALKS

FRANK DEFORD

The sportswriter and the author of “The Old Ball Game: How John McGraw, Christy Mathewson, and the New York Giants Created Modern Baseball” discusses the history of the national pastime. (New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park W., at 77th St. 212-485-9205. Sept. 29 at 6:30.)

LARRY KRAMER

The playwright and activist talks with Michael Specter, a writer for this magazine, about his new book, “The Tragedy of Today’s Gays.” (Strand Bookstore, Broadway at 12th St. No tickets necessary. Sept. 29 at 6:30.)

EAST VILLAGE HURRICANE RELIEF

The Bowery Poetry Club and the Poetry Project host a pair of back-to-back benefits for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The first features Amiri and Amina Baraka, Anne Waldman, Eric Bogosian, Marc Ribot, and many other performers, writers, and musicians. (308 Bowery, between Bleeker and Houston Sts. 212-614-0505. Sept. 30, starting at 6.) The second includes Toni Morrison, Cecil Taylor, Yusef Komunyakaa, and others. (St. Mark’s In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-0910. Oct. 1, starting at 1.)

“WORKS & PROCESS”

The performing-arts series at the Guggenheim turns its focus on the Irish poet Paul Muldoon. Four of his poems have been set to music by leading theatrical composers, and those works are now getting their world-première performances, featuring the vocalist Darius de Haas. Muldoon will also be on hand, reading and talking with John Harrington, the dean of humanities at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. Oct. 2-3 at 8.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

“LONDON IN THE VILLAGE”

Partners & Crime Mystery Booksellers presents a literary festival with an emphasis on British writers. It includes radio plays by Agatha Christie, an appearance by the author Ruth Rendell (her first in New York in more than ten years), and a Know Your Cockney Rhyming Slang contest, which will be led by the writers Jacqueline Winspear and Tony Broadbent. (44 Greenwich Ave., at Charles St. 212-243-0440. Sept. 27-Oct. 5.)

PRELUDE '05 FESTIVAL

This four-day gathering of playwrights and performers offers an early look at forthcoming work by many of the city’s more adventurous artists. Richard Maxwell, Mac Wellman, Cynthia Hopkins, and members of the Elevator Repair Service and Big Dance Theatre are among those presenting material and participating in panel discussions. (Martin E. Segal Theatre, Graduate Center, City University of New York, Fifth Ave. at 34th St. For more information, call 212-352-3101. Sept. 28-Oct. 1.)

KNIT-OUT & CROCHET 2005

Thirty years ago, Union Square Park was known as Needle Park, thanks to the drug addicts who called it home. Now an annual celebration of all things yarn includes a fashion show (for kids and dogs), demonstrations, and a chance to share tips, techniques, and yes, needles, albeit ones of a very different sort. (Broadway at 17th St. Oct. 2 from noon to 5. For more information, visit www.knit-out.com.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

Desire in all its incarnations—greed, envy, longing, wonderment—is the subtext of Sotheby’s upcoming sale of jewels (Sept. 28), whether its object is a delicate leaf-shaped enamel-and-pearl Art Nouveau ring or a (rather more expensive) eighteen-carat yellow diamond; the “arcade” sale of more moderately priced jewelry takes place the following day. In an auction of Continental furniture (Sept. 30), the house offers a selection that ranges from the tasteful to the exquisite (such as a pale-green rococo desk made in Genoa in the eighteenth century), by way of the bizarre (a bronze bust of a bald man caught in a monumental yawn, after a piece by Xaver Messerschmidt). (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ Christie’s holds a two-day sale of mainly modern and contemporary prints and multiples (Sept. 28-29), its largest ever, followed by a sale of Old Master paintings (Sept. 30), in which portraits of bewigged gentlemen share the bill with landscapes, religious paintings, and a surreal, monochrome architectural fantasy by François de Nomé, a.k.a. Monsu Desiderio. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ A striking red-and-black-jacketed first edition of Faulkner’s “Sartoris” and a broad selection of works by D. H. Lawrence highlight a sale of books at Swann on Sept. 29. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)



ON THE HORIZON

NIGHT LIFE FLYING HIGH

Oct. 13

The transgendered torch singer Antony has been a downtown fixture for a decade, but he just won England’s Mercury Prize for his latest album, “I Am a Bird Now,” and he will appear with his band, the Johnsons, at Carnegie Hall. (212-247-7800.)

MOVIES BELLE

Oct. 17-Nov. 23

The French actress Isabelle Huppert is the subject

of a twenty-five-film retrospective at MOMA, which will include Michael Haneke’s “The Piano Teacher,” in which Huppert plays a masochistic music instructor who lives with her mother; Jean-Luc Godard’s “Every Man for Himself”; and the U.S. premiere of Patrice Chéreau’s “Gabrielle,” in which she plays a woman in a loveless marriage. (212-708-9480.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC BACK TO THE MINES

Oct. 23-Nov. 5

Richard Rodney Bennett—better known in Manhattan as a cabaret pianist than

as a composer—enjoyed some success in 2004 when his opera “The Mines of Sulphur,” a last-minute replacement at Glimmerglass Opera, became a surprise hit. Now its sister company, New York City Opera, brings the piece downstate for five performances. (212-721-6500.)

ART FORM AND FUNCTION

Oct. 23-Jan. 9

Robert Storr organized the Museum of Modern Art’s “Elizabeth Murray,” which will consist of some seventy-five paintings and works on paper by the American painter,

including several of her signature shaped canvases depicting domestic objects like teacups and furniture. (212-708-9400.)

THE THEATRE CUT ABOVE

Nov. 3

Michael Cerveris, a Tony Award winner for last year’s “Assassins,” plays the murderous barber and Patti LuPone plays the meat-pie entrepreneur in a revival of Stephen Sondheim’s 1979 musical thriller, “Sweeney Todd.” In John Doyle’s innovatively staged production, all the cast members do double duty as musicians. (212-239-6200.)

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT RAIN AND FIRE



Movie screenings in private theatres for invited audiences, with drinks, canapés, and opportunities to schmooze with stars and directors, are a favorite tactic of the Manhattan branches of Hollywood's publicity machines. The goal is to generate buzz, which, with any luck, will trickle down to the ticket-buying masses. Early autumn is a big season for new releases, and last week, what with the opening of the New York Film Festival and all, there were lots of such screenings around town.

One of them was different. Its setting was a modest auditorium in the immodest East Side mansion that houses the Council on Foreign Relations. The audience consisted of diplomats, military officers, international bankers and lawyers, and think-tankers. The speakers after the lights went up were white-haired gentlemen in business suits: Pete Peterson, the council's chairman; Ted Turner, the billionaire philanthropist and founder of CNN; Warren Buffett, the folk philosopher and fabulously rich investor; Richard Lugar, Republican, the current chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; and Sam Nunn, Democrat, the retired chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee,

and now head of a nongovernmental organization called the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

The film, "Last Best Chance," was a bit unusual, too. You might even say it isn't really a movie at all—it just plays one on TV. Set in the near future, it takes the form of a slick international suspense thriller, the kind that cuts from a rainswept warehouse in a bleak corner of the former Soviet empire to a dimly lit White House Situation Room. It has no sex scenes, no car chases, and no wisecracking sidekicks, and it is only forty-five minutes long, but it lays out a frighteningly plausible narrative of how terrorists might buy or steal the makings of a nuclear bomb, assemble one, smuggle it halfway around the world, and

send it on its way to an American city in an S.U.V. The closest thing to a star in the cast is Fred Thompson, the lawyer turned actor turned Republican senator from Tennessee turned actor again. Thompson plays the President of the United States, and his character is mature, wise, and serious—the one jarringly unrealistic note in the picture.

"Last Best Chance" was made not by a movie studio but by a singularly unraffish indie producer: Nunn's Nuclear Threat Initiative, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the MacArthur Foundation. The blurb on its poster comes not from Ebert & Roeper but from Kean & Hamilton—Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton, the chairman and vice-chairman of the 9/11 Commission. Its grosses are zero. For the past five months, it has been distributed free on DVD. Now it has been taken up by HBO, which plans to show it repeatedly, beginning on October 17th.

"Last Best Chance" is entertaining, in a grim sort of way, but entertainment is not its *raison d'être*. Its purpose is to stimulate public support and political pressure on the Bush Administration and Congress to do something serious about the terrifying danger of nuclear terrorism. And this is a scandal. It is scandalous that at this late date, four years after the attacks on New York and Washington, people like Nunn, Lugar, and Buffett feel it necessary to go to such unorthodox lengths to get the attention of Washington's responsables. "Last Best



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL



GREGORY

"So he got a trophy for good sportsmanship—that doesn't mean he won't go to law school."

Chance" is a symptom of an immense failure of national, and especially Presidential, leadership. "As short a time ago as nine years or eight years," Turner said in his remarks after the screening, "I still thought that nuclear weapons, biological and chemical weapons, was an area that the government took care of."

One of the attendees at the screening was Graham Allison, the founding dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the director of its Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, who held high Pentagon posts under Reagan and Clinton. Allison's "Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe," which has just been published in an expanded paperback edition, is the indispensable text on the subject. "Americans are no safer from a nuclear terrorist attack today than we were on September 10, 2001," he writes. "A central reason for that can be summed up in one word: Iraq." The invasion and occupation have diverted essential resources from the fight against Al Qaeda; allowed the Taliban to regroup in Afghanistan; fostered neglect of the Iranian nuclear threat; undermined alliances critical to preventing terrorism; devastated America's standing with the public in every country in Europe and destroyed it in the Muslim world; monopolized the time and attention of the President and his security team (for simple human reasons, an extraordinarily important factor); and, thanks to the cry-wolf falsity of the claims about Iraqi weapons systems,

"discredited the larger case for a serious campaign to prevent nuclear terrorism."

On the "positive" side, the Iraq quagmire has obliged the Administration to postpone its latent dream of regime change in North Korea (a beautiful dream, but not as beautiful, perhaps, as the reality of that country's nuclear arsenal is ugly) in favor of diplomacy—diplomacy that, last week, yielded what may be the beginnings of a deal to induce Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear outlawry. But, over all, war on terror or no, the nuclear danger remains an almost invisible priority.

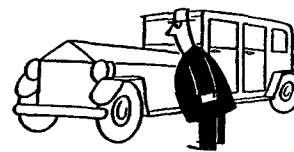
A little unilateralism—the President's favorite mode of leadership—might be in order. The United States still has some ten thousand nuclear bombs in its inventory; Russia has at least seven thousand, plus unknown thousands of "tactical" weapons, many as powerful as the Hiroshima bomb. Both countries still keep vast numbers of them on hair-trigger alert. All this made a twisted kind of sense during the Cold War; now it is irrational to the point of insanity. "We should take most of those weapons off high alert," Nunn said after the screening. "We should take them off for our own security interests. The Russians should take them off for their own security interests." In 1991, thanks to the initiative of Senator Lugar and then-Senator Nunn, the United States launched a program aimed at giving the Russians financial and technical help in "locking down" their bombs and other weapons-adaptable nuclear mate-

rial subject to theft or diversion. Fourteen years later, half of Russia's material is still unsecured, and at the present rate the job won't be finished until 2022. We don't have that long. If the President cared to make the effort, it could be finished in four years or less. Also in urgent need of attention are about a hundred civilian laboratories and reactors in dozens of countries, including the United States—all containing bomb-grade material, some protected by no more than a night watchman and a chain-link fence. Even of an Administration so benighted that it spurns the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and pursues plans to build new generations of "bunker-busting" nukes, this is not too much to ask.

After the September 11th attacks, Condoleezza Rice said that no one had imagined planes being smashed into buildings. After Hurricane Katrina, President Bush said that no one had imagined the breach of the levees. These statements were untrue, of course, but Rice and Bush probably believed them at the time. What no one can say, or can have said in good faith for many years, is that no one has imagined nuclear terrorism, and not just onscreen. With another hurricane about to make landfall in this strange season of apocalypse, the old spiritual's prophecy of the rainbow sign to Noah should not be forgotten: no more water, the fire next time.

—Hendrik Hertzberg

DEPT. OF GOOD INTENTIONS FENDER BENDER



One afternoon a few weeks ago, Jennifer Philbin, a writer for "The O.C.," was driving her BMW in heavy traffic on Wilshire Boulevard, in Los Angeles, when she passed the remnants of an accident. She turned to look and promptly ran into the car in front of her—a Saab wagon. She and the Saab's driver, a man in his late forties, pulled over to assess the damage. There didn't seem to be any; she had hardly been moving. Nonetheless, the man insisted on summoning a police officer. Eventu-



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ally, one came over from the other accident, examined the Saab's bumper, and said, "I don't really see anything here." The driver of the Saab, citing possible "structural damage," was adamant. The policeman filled out an accident report.

These particulars, and many that followed, came to light the other day, thanks to the efforts of Philbin's fiancé, Michael Schur, a twenty-nine-year-old Harvard graduate and a writer for the NBC sitcom "The Office," who converted his indignation over the fender bender into a campaign both to embarrass the Saab driver and to raise money for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. In two mass e-mails, and then on a blog, he dissected the incident and its moral implications, striving to turn his inner Larry David into an inner Augustine, or, at least, an inner Oprah.

Schur's involvement began several days after the accident, when Saab Guy, as Schur christened him, called Philbin to report that there was a crease in his bumper's plastic cover and that it would cost \$836.96 to fix. This news prompted Schur to commandeer the phone and demand digital photos.

The man responded, according to Schur, "It really isn't the kind of thing that shows up in a photograph."

So instead Schur paid a visit to the garage at Saab Guy's office. ("It might not surprise you to find out that the man is a lawyer," Schur's e-mail said.) Together, the two men inspected the car. "I kid you not," Schur wrote. "You have to be within six inches of the bumper to see the 'crease.'"

Saab Guy told Schur, "Look, I could live with it, but I just don't want to." Schur pointed out that petty accident claims contribute to skyrocketing insurance rates.

"I don't care about insurance rates," the lawyer replied.

"You should care," Schur said. "You're a resident of this city, and it's a huge problem." Schur then thought of something about which the lawyer should care even more. He proposed, on the spot, to contribute the \$836.96 to the Red Cross in Saab Guy's name, to help provide relief to the victims of Katrina. The lawyer didn't seem interested. He wanted his bumper fixed. But Schur kept after him. Finally, the lawyer said, "O.K., I'll think about it."

Schur went to meet some friends, who agreed that a creased bumper, when measured against a calamity like Katrina, was trivial indeed, and they, too, immediately pledged donations in Saab Guy's name. Within an hour, Schur had raised \$1,936, which inspired him to try for more. He wrote his first mass e-mail, asking for donations to the "Mike Schur Saab Guy Katrina Fund" from people who'd already given on behalf of the hurricane's victims, from those who had not, or from those who merely, as he wrote, "just want to see Saab Guy shamed like the jerk he is." If Saab Guy agreed to the arrangement, the donations would be made in his name. If he didn't, the donations could be made under "Saab Guy Is an Asshole." The e-mail shot out into the world. Within hours, friends, and friends of friends, had pledged nearly twelve thousand dollars. "This is the greatest thing ever," Schur wrote. By the next day, the haul was up to thirty thousand.

But then came the qualms. Since launching the campaign, Schur and Philbin had occasionally looked at each other and said, "Why do I feel bad?" Of the hundreds of responses they received, only a few were negative, but one of those, from someone they didn't know, put into words their sense of unease. Their campaign, the e-mailer wrote, was "extremely distasteful," not only because they were exploiting the tragedy of Katrina but because Saab Guy had every right to his money, since his car had been damaged and he had been hit from behind. Schur and Philbin stayed up until 2 A.M. working over the ethical implications. Schur wondered, "Well, I drive a thirty-four-thousand-dollar Acura TL. Who am I to tell people that they should donate to charity?" He asked himself whether he should sell his watch, buy a cheap one, and donate the difference. "It's a slippery slope," he said.

The next morning, Schur found himself paralyzed by, and luxuriating in, his misgivings. Vengeful philanthropy: it was a category unto itself. He spent a couple of hours cold-calling ethics professors around the country. A consensus emerged that the problem lay in the desire to induce shame. Charity was good, but spite was not. He worked up the courage to call Saab Guy again, and he

reiterated his offer, adding that some friends of his had also pledged money. "I don't want to say he ignored it, but he kept going on with his thought process," Schur recalled. "He did say, though, that he'd been thinking about whether he was being petty." Saab Guy didn't ask Schur how much had been pledged, and Schur didn't go out of his way to tell him. Nor did Schur mention the sprawl of his campaign, the blog, or the fact that a charitable enterprise had been launched under the banner "Saab Guy Is an Asshole."

At any rate, Saab Guy made a counteroffer: "What if I take some part of your money and give it to charity and use some part of it to fix my bumper?"

Schur said, "That sounds great," and sent him a check for the full amount, restoring what Schur called "a fairly delicate balance in the universe."

"It's possible he thinks of me as a morally high-handed little snotnosed jerk who tried to tell him what to do with his money," Schur reflected. "It's also possible that he thinks the next time someone bumps into him he shouldn't care as much."

Neither, really. "He was a very thoughtful, nice young man," Saab Guy said last Friday. He called the affair a "non-issue," and noted that Schur's check was still sitting next to his phone, uncashed. "I'm actually still trying to figure out whether to just send it back."

—Nick Paumgarten

DRINK UP DEPT. A BETTER LIFE



Roustam Tariko, a forty-three-year-old, six-foot-three Russian entrepreneur, introduced his Imperia vodka here earlier this month with a party for a thousand guests at the foot of the Statue of Liberty.

"I just like people—many, many people," he said out at Liberty Island on the eve of the party. "I want to do something for people. This drives me. I am president of Russian Standard Company, biggest luxury vodka in Russia. My bank, Russian Standard Bank, issues biggest number of credit

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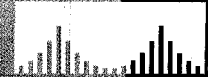
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Police officers now handle routine tasks from their vehicles, so they can spend more time on patrol. Officers, firefighters, and other emergency personnel can immediately access vital information anywhere. The Cisco network will also help the city save money. New voice-activated communications devices, which operate over the wireless network, are expected to reduce cell-phone costs by up to 70%.

In an era of shrinking budgets and increased demands for public safety, the city of Renton, Washington, has found a better way to keep its citizens safe and its officers productive—without increasing costs. A secure, reliable Cisco wireless networking solution has helped turn its police cars into roving Wi-Fi hot spots, so officers spend more time in the streets and less time in the station.

In 2002, Renton's police department faced a formidable challenge: improve public safety at a time when the city had a \$2 million annual budget deficit. Increasing the size of the police force wasn't an option. So Renton Police Chief Garry Anderson turned to a Cisco wireless solution, supported by an intelligent Cisco network infrastructure, to increase the time existing officers spend on patrol.

Now, Renton police officers equipped with wireless devices handle routine administrative tasks that once required a trip to the station—such as filing reports—from their patrol cars. More important, patrol officers have instant, reliable access to the information they need to protect the community. One officer, for instance, used his vehicle laptop to download a mug shot and quickly locate a suspect's home address, resulting in an arrest that otherwise may have eluded him.

Other emergency-response personnel also benefit from the wireless network. For example, firefighters can investigate potential chemical and other hazards at the scene of a fire—while en route.

With the help of Cisco networking technology, Renton has emerged as a leader among cities for enhancing its public services—without impacting its budget.

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cards in Russia. I want for Russian people to have their own best vodka, their own best bank, their own best credit card."

Tariko has dark, thick hair, long to the collar, and he was dressed in rumpled Armani. His assistant, Tatyana Polyakova, with short blond hair, had on sneakers and an embroidered silk jacket. ("Bought in antique market in Shanghai," she said.) She watched her boss attentively as he directed arrangements for the enormous party. Beams of red light shone through rows of clear, red-capped bottles of the new vodka. "More red!" Tariko shouted.

"Roustam is a hands-on president," Polyakova said, in slightly Oxford-accented English. "Roustam always knows. I go with Roustam to work in all the countries. Always flying. In Roustam's plane, making international business. I am from Estonia. I learned my English from the BBC. Roustam grew up in Tatarstan. His mother was Communist Party official. Very stern Communist," she said pleasantly.

Tariko turned to consult with a crew hanging giant Russian and American flags near the red-lit vodka bottles. He then supervised the positioning of an entertainment stage on a docked barge, and he checked the acoustics for an orchestra that would be playing Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky.

"Roustam, look," Polyakova said, indicating the lit-up Statue of Liberty.

"So important," he said. "I knew my party must be with Statue of Liberty. Symbol of a better life." He went on, "Guests will sit on big black velvet pillows decorated with gold crest, like Romanoffs. We follow menu of Tsar Alexander III. Best beluga caviar, served only with blinis and sour cream. Highest quality piroshki! Russian meatballs in vodka sauce on black toothpicks, quail eggs with horseradish cream, red borscht, whole roasted sturgeon, suckling pig, beef Stroganoff. Chilled Imperia vodka! We drink, we drink, we drink!"

Tariko said he had no sense of America when he was in school, in Tatarstan. "I was proud of my Soviet country, of wearing Young Pioneer uniform, bombarded by my mother's Communist propaganda," he said. He went to Moscow for the first time at seventeen, to enroll in the Moscow Institute of Transport Engineers. "I had English grammar book and started to

teach myself," he said. "I read 'Catcher in Rye,' in Russian. I was amazed at freedom in 'Catcher in Rye!' Freedom to have those perceptions of life!

"My biggest entertainment in Moscow was to go to the subway and watch people," he continued. "When American students visited, I watched them, I learned English from them. They took me to only pizza shop at that time in Moscow, 1979, for first pizza. One incredible guy, from Texas, gave me jeans, gave me polo shirts. He was a poor guy, but with a big heart. In Tatarstan, I never had a drink of vodka. At student party, I drank vodka for first time. Terrible taste, so we put it with Coca-Cola. We students did not have



Roustam Tariko

ice. Americans took me to hotel for foreigners, and I had ice for first time, with Coca-Cola and vodka. But still vodka had terrible taste. Imperia is only luxury vodka in Russia. Is now seventy per cent of premium vodka consumed in Russia. Is good for people.

"Better life for people," he went on. "I go where I want, when I want. I live, in Moscow, in best residential area. I have a house in Sardinia; I just bought it, from wife of Silvio Berlusconi. I never do anything I do not like. I do not moralize. I never distinguish between work and pleasure. I admire Bill Gates. I aspire for a private meeting with Bill Gates. I want to ask, 'What drives you?'"

—Lillian Ross

LOST PROPERTY WHAT RIDERS READ



The other day, Meredith Blum and Gordon Moore went to Penn Station to collect twenty-four boxes of books from the Lost Property Unit of New York City Transit. The books had been left on trains and buses and in subway stations. Blum and Moore are employees of the Housing Works Bookstore Café, on Crosby Street, which sells donated books and music. Blum is small and blond, with delicate features, and Moore is tall and thin. Blum works in the bookstore office, and Moore helps with Internet sales. They drove up Eighth Avenue in a borrowed white van.

Housing Works does not usually pick up books; it expects people to deliver them. The store receives about fifty boxes a day. If someone calls and says, for example, that his or her companion just died and left shelves of books, "we usually try to interview them carefully, so that we don't end up with thirty boxes of romance novels," Blum says. An employee of the M.T.A. named Anant Patel had called and said that the Transit Authority had been collecting books for a year and wondered if Housing Works would like them.

Blum and Moore parked on Eighth Avenue at Thirty-fourth Street, and went down into the subway. At the end of a long hall was a door on which was written "Lost Property Unit." Beyond it was a cinderblock vestibule with a thick window, like one at a pawnshop. Moore knocked on the window, and a young woman opened the door. Among the people standing around and sitting at metal desks in a room behind it was Anant Patel. He gave Blum his card, which said, "Operations Specialist, Asset Recovery—Rejected Material, Material Division." Blum and Moore followed him to a room where boxes of books were piled. Around them, on metal shelves lined up against each other like files in a doctor's office, were rows of purses.

Moore began loading boxes onto a hand truck. "You guys take Bibles?" Patel asked. "We just got rid of Bibles, maybe a week ago. Ten boxes."

"We'd probably have a hard time with that," Blum said. She looked at Moore, and he nodded.

Patel shrugged. "We gave them to a Bible society," he said. "They seemed glad to have them."

Blum signed some papers on a clipboard. Meanwhile, an employee who said that he had worked at the Lost Property Office for twelve years talked about the kinds of things that had been found. "Strange stuff, mostly," he said. "False teeth. A prosthetic limb."

While Moore loaded boxes, Blum opened several. The first had two "Harry Potter"s, "one of them the new one," Blum said, and a lot of academic books. Peering into a box that had "Asst. soft-cover books" written on it, she said, "Here's 'Ulysses.' And 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'West Side Story' in the same book."

Driving downtown, Blum said that she was hopeful of finding rare books. "It happens sometimes," she said. "You also find amazing ephemera that people use as bookmarks—postcards, love notes, and old Polaroids of families." By the following day, she had opened most of the boxes and found "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," "The Lord of the Flies," "Curious George," a program for "Mamma Mia!," "The Long Hard Road Out of Hell," by Marilyn Manson, with Neil Strauss, a novel printed in Russian, apparently about a spy, "The Firefighter's Workout Book," "The Glucose Revolution," many devotional books (some in Hebrew and some in Arabic), a book called "Life in a Mediaeval Monastery," one called "How to Meet the Right Woman: A Five-Step Strategy That Really Works," apparently never opened, and "Transit Talk: New York Bus and Subway Workers Tell Their Stories," by Robert W. Snyder, in which one supervisor says that when workers walk on the tracks they should listen. "The trains talk to you," he says. "You can hear the rails clicking, they talk to you, they tell you they're coming." She also found several diaries. One began, "Hi, it's me, and I'm here to tell you we had stinking weather so far in Montauk." Most of the textbooks were math books. From a high-school student who volunteers at the store she learned that on the last day of school kids tend to leave their textbooks wherever they feel like it. As for ephemera, the best thing she found were some snapshots of very young men holding babies in their arms.

—Alec Wilkinson

DEPT. OF HOOPLA ROUND-TRIP DETECTIVE



Half a dozen men and women were sitting around a table at Enjoy!!!, a tea room in Ossining, New York, the other day when a stretch limousine pulled up. Out stepped Peter Falk, in from the West Coast to promote a new movie and to spend an afternoon in Ossining, where he grew up, in celebration of a street's being named after him. He'd arranged to meet up with some childhood friends before the ceremony: "My God, Pete." "So good to see you, Pete." "Peter, get a load of you." One man said that for decades he'd been meaning to thank Falk for sending a TV set to his mother's house so that his family could watch "Columbo."

Falk, who is ruddy and short-waisted, had on zippered boots and an orange-and-pink flowered shirt. He grinned and made a V in the air with his arms. "Jesus Christ," he said. "I gotta piss."

It's been a while since Falk has been seen in Ossining, which is about thirty miles upriver from Manhattan. "The last time I was here?" he said. "Let's see, it's a photo finish between my fiftieth high-school reunion, in 1995, and the time I went to visit Alan Arkin, in Briarcliff." He continued, "When I got there, Alan said, 'Congratulations.' I said, 'For what?' He said, 'For the great reviews for the movie.' I said, 'For that piece of crap I just did.' He said, 'No, for 'The In-Laws.' I said, 'Alan, we did 'The In-Laws' a long time ago.' He said, 'Yeah, but they just did a remake with Michael Douglas and everybody's saying it's not as good as the original.' I got better reviews for the second one than for the one I was in."

A white-haired man said, "Pete, were you in the class when they put the artificial dog turd on the floor?"

"I don't know," Falk said. "Something tells me I must have been."

Another man, a retired Avon executive, said he had a picture of Falk from his days in the merchant marine. "I looked good, didn't I?" Falk said. "To join, there were eye tests. I once had an eye test, the guy told me to cover my

right eye; I did twenty-twenty. Then he told me to cover the other eye; I said, 'I can't. I got a glass eye.' He said, 'Well, do the best you can.'"

After about half an hour, Falk got back into his limo and headed for 73 Prospect Avenue, the house that he grew up in. Two hundred people had assembled in the street in front of it. "I'll be a son of a bitch," he said. The mayor of Ossining read a letter from Hillary Rodham Clinton. Six other town officials said a few words, then directed Falk to look up at a signpost on the corner. The top of the post was covered with a tan trenchcoat, which, when Falk pulled it off, revealed a sign that read "Peter Falk Place." Falk held the coat to his face for a long moment. "My real



Peter Falk

coat, they say it's in the Smithsonian now," he said. "I had it for thirty years. I took good care of it. I put out a saucer of milk for it every night."

Finally, Falk got back into his car and asked his old friend Eileen O'Connor, a retired legal secretary, to give him a quick tour. They drove by the high school and the former site of the dry-goods store that belonged to Falk's father. Falk asked the driver to pull over at the entrance to Sing Sing, the prison. "The school used to bring the ball team here to play the inmates," he said. A guard came over and asked if the group was there to visit an inmate, then he recognized Falk.

"Columbo!" he said.

"You're under arrest," Falk said.

—Eric Konigsberg

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LETTER FROM LOUISIANA

HIGH WATER

How Presidents and citizens react to disaster.

BY DAVID REMNICK

On September 10, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson had lunch in the Roosevelt Room—the “Fish Room,” as F.D.R. called it—with several aides and half a dozen ambassadors of modest-sized countries. Then he returned to the Oval Office for a routine round of meetings and telephone calls—a fairly ordinary, crowded day amid the growing crisis of the war in Vietnam. At 2:36 P.M., according to copies of Johnson’s daily diaries, the President took a call from Senator Russell Long, of Louisiana. The day before, Hurricane Betsy had made landfall on the Gulf Coast. Storm gusts were up to a hundred and sixty miles an hour, and in New Orleans levees had been breached, causing much of the city to flood overnight, especially the neighborhoods of Bywater, Pontchartrain Park, and the largely black and impoverished Ninth Ward. The Army Corps of Engineers later reported as many as eighty-one deaths, a quarter-million people evacuated, and water levels of up to nine feet. Hurricane Betsy was the worst disaster to strike New Orleans since the cholera epidemic of 1849 and the yellow-fever epidemic of 1905.

Russell Long, the son of Huey Long and an old friend of Johnson’s in the Senate, had a simple goal. He wanted to convince the President of the urgency of the crisis and have him come immediately to Louisiana. Their conversation is rich with emotional and political manipulation. Long made it clear to Johnson that to delay, or to send a subordinate, could easily have consequences in the 1968 election:

SENATOR LONG: Mr. President, aside from the Great Lakes, the biggest lake in America is Lake Pontchartrain. It is now drained dry. That Hurricane Betsy picked the lake up and put it inside New Orleans and Jefferson Parish, the Third [Congressional] District. . . . If I do say it, our people are just like . . . It’s like my home—The whole damn home’s been destroyed, but that’s all right. My wife and kids are still alive, so it’s O.K. Mr. President, we have really had it down there, and *we need your help*.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: All right. You got it.

LONG: Well, now, if I do say it . . . we’ve lost only one life so far. Why we haven’t lost more I can’t say. . . . For example, that damn big four-hundred-year-old tree fell on top of my house. My wife and kids were, thank God, in the right room. So we’re still alive. I don’t need no federal aid. But, Mr. President, my people—Oh, they’re in tough shape. . . . If I do say it, you could elect Hale Boggs and every guy you’d want to elect in the path of this hurricane just by handling yourself right.

Now, if you want to go to Louisiana right now—You lost that state last year. You could pick it up just like looking at it right now by going down there as the President just to see what happened. . . . Just go, and say, “My God, this is horrible! . . . These federally constructed levees that Hale Boggs and Russell Long built is the only thing that saved five thousand lives.” See now, if you want to do that you can do it right now. Just pick one state up like looking at it—you lost it last time. If you’d do that you’d sack them up. [Louisiana congressman] Ed Willis is sitting on this telephone and he knows like I do that all you’ve got to do is just make a generous gesture, he’d get reelected, a guy that’s for you.

JOHNSON: Russell, I sure want to. I’ve got a hell of a two days that I’ve got scheduled. Let me look and see what I can back out of and get into and so on and so forth and let me give you a ring back. If I can’t go, I’ll put the best man I got there.

LONG: So now listen, we are not the least bit interested in your best man. . . . I’m just a Johnson man. Let’s—

JOHNSON: I know that. I know that.

LONG: . . . Just make it a stopover. . . . You go to Louisiana right now, land at Moisant Airport. [Imagining a news story] “The President was very much upset about the horrible destruction and damage done to this city of New Orleans, lovely town. The town that everybody loves.” If you go there right now, Mr. President, they couldn’t beat you if Eisenhower ran.

JOHNSON: Um-hmm. Let me think about it and call you back.

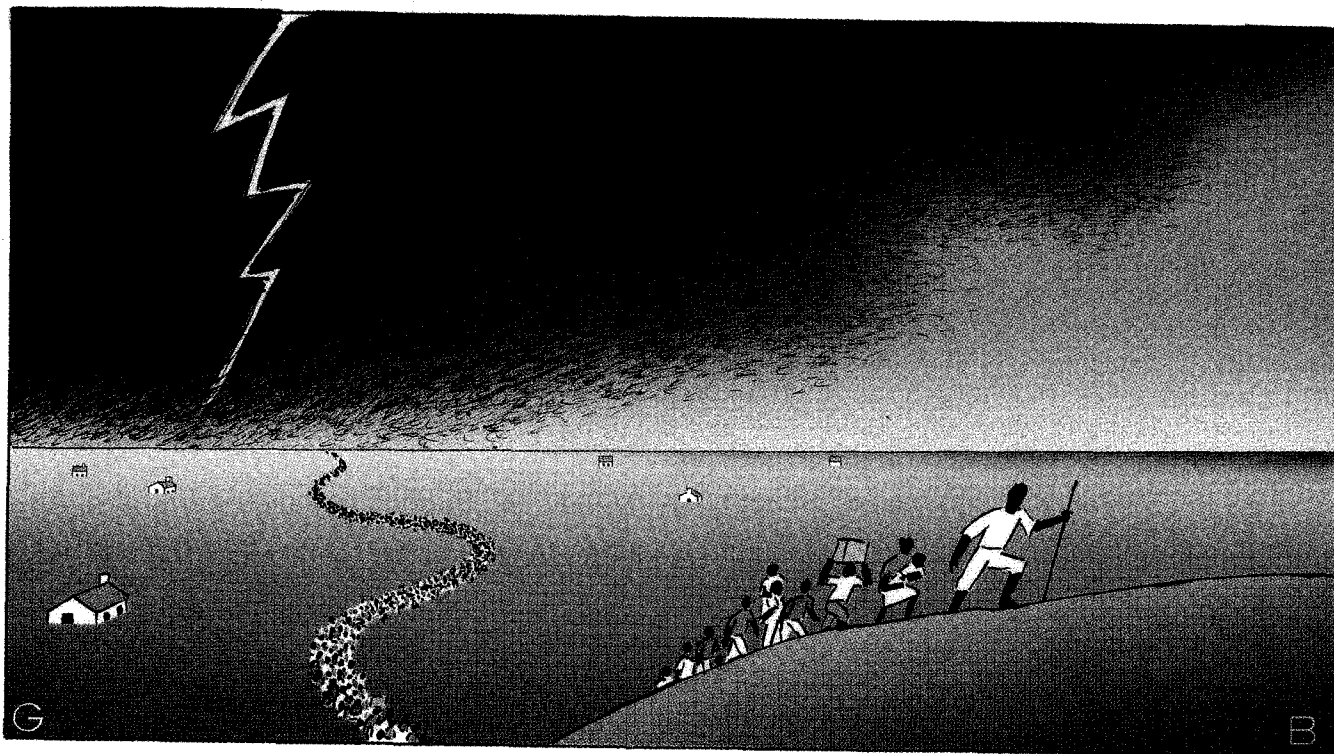
Johnson hung up. He met with Bill Moyers, Larry O’Brien, J. Edgar Hoover, and others. He accepted an award from the leaders of the World Convention of Churches of Christ. Then, at 5:03 P.M., he boarded a helicopter on the South Lawn, and it ferried him to Andrews Air Force Base. From there the President—along with Russell Long and Representative Hale Boggs, the key congressional powers in Louisiana, and officials from

the Red Cross and the Army Corps of Engineers—flew to New Orleans on Air Force One. “The President spent a good deal of the time talking w/ Senator Long and Cong. Hale Boggs during the flight,” the diary says. “Also worked in his bedroom w/ [his assistants] on mail that had been taken on the flight. Afterwards, the President napped for about 30

were carrying the barest of their possessions and many of them had been sitting on top of their houses waiting for rescue squads to retrieve the families and carry them to dry land.” Johnson talked with a seventy-four-year-old black man named William Marshall and asked about what had happened and how he was getting along. As the conversation ended, Mar-

as people approached and asked him for food and water; one woman asked Johnson for a boat so that she could look for her two sons, who had been lost in the flood.

“Little Mayor, this is horrible,” Johnson said to Schiro. “I’ve never seen anything like this in my life.” Johnson assured Schiro that the resources of the



Many of the poorest evacuees believe that the flooding of New Orleans was part of a larger plan to drive them away.

minutes before arrival in New Orleans.”

Even at the airport, Johnson began to get a sense of the damage wrought by Betsy. “Parts of the roofing of the terminal were torn away and several of the large windows were broken,” the diary reads. “The members of the Presidential party had seen from the air a preview of the city—water over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the city up to the eaves of the homes, etc.” At the urging of the mayor of New Orleans—a diminutive conservative Democrat named Victor Hugo Schiro, whom Johnson referred to as “Little Mayor”—the President decided to tour the flooded areas. His motorcade stopped on a bridge spanning the Industrial Canal, in the eastern part of the city, and from there the Presidential party saw whole neighborhoods engulfed by floods. They could see, according to the diary, that “people were walking along the bridge where they had disembarked from the boats that had brought them to dry land. Many of them

shall said, “God bless you, Mr. President. God ever bless you.”

In the Ninth Ward, Johnson visited the George Washington Elementary School, on St. Claude Avenue, which was being used as a shelter. “Most of the people inside and outside of the building were Negro,” the diary reads. “At first, they did not believe that it was actually the President.” Johnson entered the crowded shelter in near-total darkness; there were only a couple of flashlights to lead the way.

“This is your President!” Johnson announced. “I’m here to help you!”

The diary describes the shelter as a “mass of human suffering,” with people calling out for help “in terribly emotional wails from voices of all ages. . . . It was a most pitiful sight of human and material destruction.” According to an article by the historian Edward F. Haas, published fifteen years ago in the *Gulf Coast Historical Review*, Johnson was deeply moved

federal government were at his disposal and that “all red tape [will] be cut.”

The President flew back to Washington and the next day sent Schiro a sixteen-page telegram outlining plans for aid and the revival of New Orleans. “Please know,” Johnson wrote, “that my thoughts and prayers are with you and the thousands of Louisiana citizens who have suffered so heavily.”

Hurricane Katrina was more devastating than Betsy. The death toll is sure to be many times as high and the physical damage far more extensive and enduring. And yet to see the city of New Orleans a week after the flood, to see the ruin, was to be shocked much as Johnson was forty years ago. New Orleans is never abandoned easily. Driving along St. Charles Avenue, through toxic puddles that once belonged to the Mississippi River or Lake Pontchartrain, you saw a painted sign on a door reading,

"Still here. Cooking a pot of dog gumbo." Another, next to a branch of the Whitney National Bank, read, "I am sleeping inside with a big dog, an ugly woman, two shotguns and a claw hammer." By the time Hurricane Rita had reflooded parts of the city, there was almost no one left in town.

The last holdouts, especially the poorest among them, wore a look of delirium. They seemed to sense that to leave now, with no savings, with no resources, meant to leave forever. On a desolate corner in the Ninth Ward, I sat on a curb with an old woman who had been refusing rescue for more than a week. She wore a soiled housedress. She was very old and could not have weighed more than seventy-five pounds. "I'll be here to the end," she said. There was a bottle of warm beer in a paper bag at her feet. She didn't drink from it. She was just dazed by the sun and the heat and the emptiness of her street. She was firm in her belief that all her neighbors, now in shelters in Lafayette, Houston, Pensacola, God knows where, were the lost ones. "Plain fools," she said. The street smelled of low tide in a tidal swamp. She said, "They're jealous of me. I got forty-four dollars' worth of meat in that icebox inside, and they ain't gonna take it from me. Nobody gonna lock me out of my home."

Although there were no looters now and very few residents, the streets were still being patrolled in fantastic numbers by—and this is a random sampling—the New Orleans Police, New Orleans SWAT teams, the New York City Police Department, the Sacramento Fire Department, the Greenbelt, Maryland, police, private Blackwater security contractors, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the 82nd Airborne, National Guardsmen, San Diego lifeguards, Surf Zone Relief Operations, and, in yellow T-shirts, Scientology Disaster Response teams. The Scientologists pitched a tent outside Harrah's Casino with a sign reading "Something Can Be Done About It," and offered massage "assists" to the police.

Eddie Compass, the superintendent of the New Orleans Police Department, was holding court in front of Harrah's. I got to know Compass years ago, when he was an up-and-comer in the department, and Jack Maple, who helped set the New York department right in the

I WAS MARRIED ON THE FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY OF PABLO NERUDA

Neither of us knew how crucial a day it would become in the history of poetry. He was in a Paris bistro sipping a chilled Moulin-à-Vent with his mistress, waiting for the chef—a Catalan he'd favored since '39—to deliver on the promised *mongetes amb butifarra* he'd yearned for all that lean day,

while I was in a courthouse in Boone, North Carolina, staring at a poster of three auto wrecks and the one word "Think!" in blazing red. The circuit judge who'd just asked me, "Do you plight your troth?"—seeing my befuddlement—saved the day: "Just say yes, young fellow, and we can all move on to what you been waiting for."

—Philip Levine

early Giuliani administration, came down as a paid consultant for the N.O.P.D. Maple was a natural for New Orleans; he was his own Mardi Gras float. He was fat and funny and wore a homburg, spectator shoes, and sharp suits, and smoked a huge Mexican cigar. In many American cities, the combination of tech-era prosperity and the sort of innovative policing techniques that Maple had helped to develop were driving crime rates down. Yet Maple, like so many consultants before him, could do little about the poverty and corruption in New Orleans. He died a couple of years ago, and now Eddie Compass, who has barely aged, was saying that he missed him. "We could use the Fat Man now," he said. "Everything else we tried failed." Five hundred of his officers—roughly thirty per cent—did not initially report in the crisis. "Either they went home to take care of their families, went missing, or, God forbid, worse." Two of his officers, including his spokesman, committed suicide during the flooding. The jails, like everything else, weren't functional, and he was keeping nearly two hundred prisoners—looters, mainly—in a makeshift lockup in the local Amtrak station. At first, Compass had no help. Now the streets were so militarized—and so depopulated—that the

city resembled a war zone with no enemy.

"Right now," he said, "New Orleans may be the single safest city in the United States."

Hurricane Katrina destroyed the structures, comforts, and protections of civilization, and the poorer you were, the more exposed you were to high water. Stripped of electricity, air-conditioning, medicine, safety, food, clean water, doctors, transport, firm ground—stripped of everything that seemed necessary to live in New Orleans—people were left with a gesture of political correctness. Within a day of the bowl of the city filling, TV commentators had instructed viewers that the people fleeing town were under no circumstances to be called refugees: "These are Americans!" Not Bosnians, not Kosovars, not Bangladeshis—Americans. And yet, of all the New Orleanians I met—in the city, or in the Cajundome, in Lafayette, in downtown Baton Rouge, in the churches and parks of New Iberia, at the Astrodome in Houston—none gave a damn for the terminology. They'd fled danger and now they were homeless, with few prospects or none at all.

At a house where I was spending the night, I sat out on the porch until early morning listening on a transistor radio to the most powerful signal on the airwaves:

WWL, 870 AM. It was a strangely efficient way of scanning the misery that had hit the Gulf Coast. The host was Garland Robinette, a sonorous broadcaster with a long history in town as a television anchor. Robinette's show was a catchall for rumors, the debunking of rumors, interviews, speculation, and a kind of regional disaster therapy.

"This is Alexandra in Algiers Point. I'm still looking for my sister, Lee Ann. If you hear anything, please call..."

"Elise, you're still looking for your family?"

"The people of the Allstate National Catastrophe Team are standing by at 1-800-54-STORM."

"Ray from Houma" called to say that at Louis Armstrong Airport two people posing as FEMA officers were telling people they had to pay fifteen dollars each to get on any buses leaving New Orleans. People traded information about gas, electricity, food supplies, and rental properties throughout the South. There were news bulletins: the floodwaters are highly

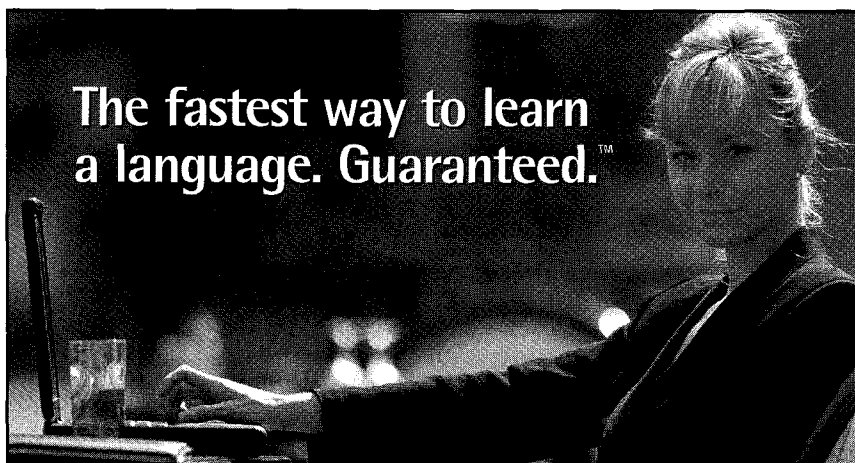
contagious, contaminated with *E. coli*, rotting flesh, spilled petroleum. Washington is sending fifty-two billion dollars. Watch out for fake Web-site charities: there are "so many the F.B.I. can't keep up with them." Here's how to get generators and chainsaws from John Deere. Here's how to begin filing insurance claims.

A few days after the storm, WWL joined in a consortium of rival stations to form United Broadcasters of New Orleans, and they were now reaching thirty-eight states and thirteen countries. The moment that brought WWL the most attention was Robinette's interview with Mayor Ray Nagin while people were still trapped in the Superdome and in the Convention Center, and Washington, particularly the White House, seemed to be on extended summer vacation. Unlike Lyndon Johnson, President Bush was slow to respond to the emergency—so slow, in fact, that his staff felt compelled to prepare a DVD of network newscasts to impress upon him the scale of the

floods, the chaos, and the suffering. "God is looking down on all this," Nagin said, "and if they are not doing everything in their power to save people they are going to pay the price. Because every day that we delay, people are dying and they're dying by the hundreds, I'm willing to bet you... Don't tell me forty thousand people are coming here. They're not here. It's too doggone late. Now get off your asses and do something, and let's fix the biggest goddam crisis in the history of this country."

One morning, I set out on Interstate 10 for St. Gabriel, a small town fifteen miles south of Baton Rouge, where federal officials had converted a warehouse into a morgue. As rescue workers found more bodies in attics and hospitals and nursing homes, they sent most of them to St. Gabriel. The death toll was a matter of speculation, and yet twenty-five thousand body bags were on their way to Louisiana. On the road, I listened to an interview on WWL with Kathleen Rhodes Astorga, of the Rhodes Funeral

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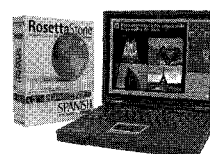
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"We do jazz funerals, celebration-of-life ceremonies, all kinds of funerals," she said. "We just want it to be with dignity and respect."

The host lowered his voice to a timbre indicating solemnity and said, "These people have drowned, spent days in the water. Do you, um, think people should just go with your judgment on whether there should be a closed casket and put a picture on it?"

Rhodes agreed. "Thinking closed casket is not a bad idea," she said.

I pulled up to the St. Gabriel morgue. A fence surrounded the place, and the policeman at the door politely rebuffed any questions. "All I can tell you is nothing," he said. "And all I can give you is this." He handed me a sheet of paper:

Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT) Process

*As deceased victims are located by local emergency workers and volunteers they are taken to the collection site. A collection site is a place where FEMA DMORT staff collects preliminary information to help identify the victim. Information collected includes:

Address or location of victim

Any documentation associated with victim

GPS coordinates

Personal effects

*From the collection site, they are taken to the Disaster Portable Mortuary Unit (DPMU) with dignity in a very respectful manner utilizing a police escort.

Ordinarily, WWL's studios are on the fifth floor of Dominion Tower, an office building near the Superdome. But the windows blew in during the storm, and WWL broadcast from a few days from a

former waste-disposal plant, in Jefferson Parish. Finally, the station moved its operations to a studio in Baton Rouge. One afternoon, I came by to meet with the news director, Dave Cohen, a man in his thirties who wore a dirty white undershirt and shorts that would soon be better incinerated than washed. Every few minutes, his cell phone would bugle him to attention. His ring tone is "When the Saints Go Marching In." He'd reach for his hip pocket in a panic. "Yes! This is Dave!" His house, in Metairie, just west of New Orleans, was flooded, but nothing, he said, like the Ninth Ward.

Because his station was the most immediate, moment-to-moment source of information in the region, I asked Cohen how it had felt to be inside the hurricane. "Friday before the storm, we were feeling good," he said. "The National Hurricane Center said that this would really hit the Florida panhandle, not us. We were barely in the 'cone of error' in New Orleans. So I kicked off for the day on Friday at one o'clock and went to the gym. But at around four my pager started going haywire. Max Mayfield, the director of the National Hurricane Center, had changed his prediction. There was a hundred-and-fifty-mile shift to the west." It was going to be a problem to get people in the city to adjust. "In New Orleans, people go home at lunch on Fridays," Cohen said. "All year round. And Friday night was a football night. The Ravens were in town to play a preseason game against the Saints at the Superdome. It was also a big high-school football night, the jamboree games, which

kick off the season. People were out drinking, having a good time. They were consuming very little media. But by Saturday morning we were told there was mandatory evacuation for Plaquemines Parish, to the southeast, and some coastal areas, though not yet New Orleans. On Saturday, Ray Nagin was still saying that we have time to watch this. A lot of people were clueless. They had no idea there were evacuations.

"We've always talked about the worst-case scenarios in Louisiana," Cohen continued. "They talk about 'SLOSH models'—computer-generated models on what would happen. The geography is obvious. If you are walking along the riverfront in downtown New Orleans, you are looking up at the Mississippi River. You look up at Lake Pontchartrain, up at the canals. When the water flows in, you have a city that becomes a tidal lake, with sharks and manatees and all the rest.

"By ten on Saturday night, Nagin was really concerned. He got a call from Max Mayfield saying that he should evacuate the city. And on Sunday morning Nagin issued a mandatory evacuation order. Sunday night, there were gale-force winds. We were told that if you weren't out by now it was too late, that—and this was the quote—'preparations to protect life and property should be rushed to completion.' We were broadcasting all of Sunday night. The power went out in the city. The eye of the storm wasn't even near us, but our windows in the downtown studio started cracking. And on Monday morning, while Garland Robinette was on the air, the windows blew in.

"Landfall was at 6 A.M. on the coast," he went on. "We feared that it would get to New Orleans at exactly 90 longitude, 30 latitude, and it got to 89.6. At 1 A.M., it went due north, and it felt like Christmas had come early. It was staying at 89.6 at 2, 3, 4 A.M. with one-hundred-and-fifty-mile-per-hour winds, but still it did not look like the worst-case scenario. Roofs were flying off houses, cars moved around in the wind, there were rapids in the streets, but still... On Monday night, there were reports that water was coming over the Seventeenth Street canal, which separates Orleans Parish and Jefferson Parish, to the west. The water was coming over in the dark. The levee itself is in Lakeview, an upscale



"Sometimes it's easier if you break the work up into little chunks."

lakefront neighborhood near where I-10 and I-610 split. At six in the morning, we were told that the levee had been ripped apart and water was pouring in. I went on the radio and said that eyewitnesses had said 'The bowl is filling.' So I said, 'Get out if you are to the east of the Seventeenth Street canal. That's the whole city. It's as bad as the Mississippi River breaking through. Lake Pontchartrain is emptying into the city of New Orleans. The water is rising and it's not going to stop. Get out now.'

"We started getting amazing phone calls: a woman in her house with a two-year-old on one shoulder, a five-year-old at her side, no formula, no food, 'What do I do?' And what can I tell her? I'm just a guy on the radio!"



ored voters. The rumor is that you cut the Industrial Canal to drown the colored people so that they would not vote in the coming election." An aide to the Mayor later reported that people claiming to be relief workers and Schiro supporters delivered bags of "supplies" to flood victims in the Ninth Ward. People opened the bags only to find spoiled food and soiled, useless clothing.

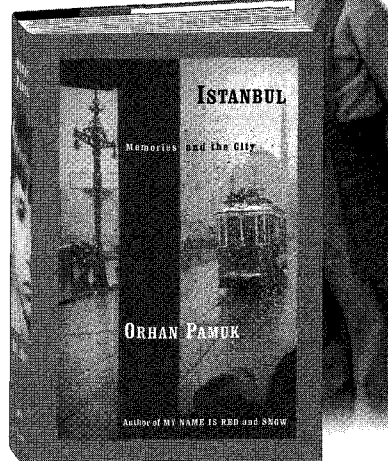
Four years ago, a play staged in New Orleans called "An Evening with Betsy" explored the old conspiracy rumors. And although among historians Schiro earns high marks for his handling of the flood (if not for his obstinate views on race), the rumors persist. "That theory is why older people in the Ninth Ward still keep hatchets in their attics," Dave Cohen had told me. "They remember what it was like to be trapped, with the water rising and no way to get to the roof."

The pattern in Katrina's wake is similar. Everywhere I went in Louisiana and Texas to talk to evacuees, many of the poorest among them were not only furious—furious at the President and local officials, furious at being ignored for days—but inclined to believe, as many did after Betsy, that the flooding of the city was, or could have been, a deliberate act.

In the town of New Iberia, south of Lafayette, a few hundred New Orleanians, nearly all of them African-American, were staying at a gym on the grounds of West End Park. It was dusk when I arrived, and people were wandering around the athletic field, shooing away clouds of mosquitoes, drinking bottles of cold water provided by the Red Cross, and recounting for each other, yet again, their exodus stories. "Biblical proportions"—everyone used that phrase, and why not? I went inside and noticed a couple of signs: "This is Our Home. Please Respect Us." "Evacuees and Volunteers Only Beyond This Point: Curfew 730, Lights Out 10, TV off at 10:30." Two of the Red Cross volunteers who had organized the shelter and were keeping it running told me that they had been at Ground Zero in New York four years ago and that, in many ways, this was worse. "A whole city ruined," one said. "More than a million people leaving

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THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

their homes." "Biblical proportions," the other said.

A friendly man in his late thirties named Walter Hays sat down to talk. Hays is African-American, a Navy veteran who had been working as a fitter at Northrop Grumman. People had painful and fantastical stories to tell—floating a family to safety in an inflatable kiddie pool, nights in the Superdome or on the street, helicopter escapes in the arms of a soldier—and Walter Hays wanted to tell his. He was in New Iberia with a group of twenty-eight close family and friends, including three infants and several small children. The adults had vowed to bring everyone out together. He talked of the beautiful weather the day after the storm, and then, the next day, he said, "the water started coming out of the ground," rolling down the streets, streaming through the floorboards. In three hours, the water was at chest level. Hays filled an ice chest with papers and the group started out, halting for two days and nights, along with two thousand other souls, on the sweltering Claiborne Avenue overpass, near the Superdome.

"We had with us three-month-old twins, a two-month-old, no water," he

said. "People were pulling guns. What we saw on that overpass was beyond imagining: there were suicides, people jumping off the bridge, older people who couldn't take it, there were dead bodies floating underneath, the whole overpass reeked of feces and urine. Fights broke out all the time. People tried to jump on whatever military vehicles went by, but of course they wouldn't let anyone on. There were choppers over our heads. We could see the touch-and-gos of the helicopters—it went on all night long, and no one got any sleep. It was so hot and humid. And the one thing I'll never forget is that the sky was so clear and full of stars. So clear because there weren't any lights from the city. And all night long the kids were crying, the adults were crying, old people crying."

In the days that followed, they made their way to higher ground. A heroin addict they met had been looting, and he gave them water, food, Pampers. He even let them bathe in his house. "And he went on looting," Hays said. "I can't really argue. If you're dealt lemons, you make lemonade." Walter Hays and the others knew they had to get out of town, but there was still no transport. A police

officer told them they should break into cars and see if they could steal one. Hays and his best friend, a grocery-store manager named Chester Pye, went to a nearby bus barn. "A guy there showed me how to hot-wire a school bus. We got our hands all slashed up from pulling wires, and it seemed like all the batteries were dead. Finally, Chester finds a good battery, and we went looking for keys." They found one that fit bus No. 9322 and picked up the rest of the extended family and headed out of town. Along the way, near the Fisher housing project, in Algiers, someone shot at the bus and demanded to be let on, but there was no room. They kept going west on Route 90, getting as far as Houma, Louisiana. On the road to New Iberia, a police officer pulled them over. "I was scared," Hays went on. "After all, we'd boosted the bus. The cop, a white guy, looked inside and saw it wasn't hot-wired. There was a key. And what did he do? He gave us a police escort and called another police escort as we left Raceland and we got the escort all the way to New Iberia. And in New Iberia an officer said to me, and I will remember this forever, he said, 'I want you to understand something. You think this is the end of life as you know it for you. But this is a new beginning. You have a lot of people pulling for you.'"

Walter Hays had been telling his story for a couple of hours, with many other details of disasters averted and kindnesses provided. By now many of his friends had gathered around him, adding clarifications and saying that, all in all, they were blessed.

"All along the way, things were strategically placed in our way by the Lord," Hays said, in agreement. "The dopehead who helped us, the bus key, the people in Houma, wading through the water, the bodies, the tiny infants who made it out, sleeping on the bridge, like it was a terrible desert. It's Biblical, isn't it? After everything we've been through, if you aren't changed morally, spiritually, then you are dead inside."

And then, just at the point where the story seemed over, with a flourish of amens and thank-the-Lords, Tyrell Pye, Chester's nephew, said, "Now, just remember." He paused and lowered his gaze at me. "Remember," he said, "this was a premeditated disaster. They flooded the city. It happened on a pretty, sun-

shiny day, two days of rising water. You tell me: where the rich people at?"

And Chester Pye said, "How come the Seventeenth Street levee broke? It's a totally poor area. And once the water started coming to St. Bernard Parish it was Oops, maybe we should start doing something?" The others nodded. They agreed with this no less than they agreed on the saving grace of God.

Except Walter Hays. He was unsure. "I just don't know about any of that," he said.

When I asked Chester Pye if he and his family would return to New Orleans, he said, "There's no reason to go back now. Back to what? Back as a tourist? The new New Orleans is going to be like Six Flags Bourbon Street, you know what I mean?"

The link between conspiracy theories and oppression is as old as racial conflict. Some early American slaves were convinced that their new owners were cannibals bringing them to the New World to eat their flesh. In Wash-

ington in the nineteen-eighties, there was often talk in poorer black communities about The Plan. This was a belief that the "white power structure" had a secret scheme to inexorably move the black population out of the District. Similarly, in shelters in Louisiana and Texas you heard the suspicion that the "higher powers" of New Orleans wanted to employ a policy of citywide gentrification through natural disaster, that a mass exile of poor African-Americans was "the silver-lining scenario." For most, it hardly seemed to matter that some wealthier neighborhoods in New Orleans, particularly Lakeview, did not escape damage.

At the Houston Astrodome, for instance, people made statements and asked questions that mixed the logical with the conspiratorial.

"Where were the buses?"

"Why is it, do you think, that the French Quarter and the Garden District are high and dry and the Ninth is flooded and gonna get bulldozed?"

"In Betsy I know the mayor blew up the levee to save those big homes on the lakefront. A lot of people believe that, especially the people who were on their roofs!"

"I couldn't leave. I was terrified. I didn't have any money, no car, nothing. Where was I supposed to go? They shoulda had some buses. It's me and my five kids. I live in Desire, the Ninth Ward. I think it was a setup to get black folks out of New Orleans forever. Look around. Who's here? Nobody but the black and the poor. They ain't got but ten white families in the whole Astrodome."

"This came from a higher power, the alpha and the omega."

At the Reliant Center, in Houston, Patricia Valentine, a fifty-four-year-old woman from Treme, a black neighborhood near the French Quarter, told me that her area was "waist high" in water and the restaurants down the street "got nothing." She was sitting in a wheelchair and said that she had no intention of returning home. "They can have New Or-

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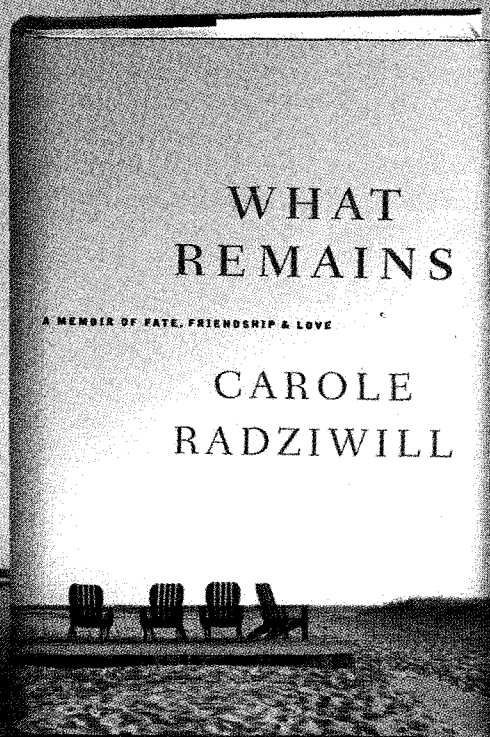
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leans," she said. "It's a toxic-waste dump now. I was in Betsy forty years ago: September, 1965. And the levee broke. What are we, stupid? Born yesterday? It's the same people drowning today as back then. They were trying to move us out anyway. They want a bigger tourist attraction, and we black folks ain't no tourist attraction."

The best-known writer to come from the Ninth Ward is Kalamu ya Salaam. A poet, playwright, and civil-rights activist, Salaam used to go by the name of Val Ferdinand. When I told Salaam what I was hearing in New Iberia and Houston, he laughed, but not dismissively. He said, "The real question is why not?" He recalled that in 1927, in the midst of the worst flooding of the Mississippi River in recorded history, the white city fathers of New Orleans—the men of the Louisiana Club, the Boston Club, and the Pickwick Club—won permission from the federal government to dynamite the Caernarvon levee, downriver from the city, to keep their interests dry. But destroying the levee also insured that the surrounding poorer St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes would flood. Thousands of the trappers who lived there lost their homes and their livelihoods. The promise of compensation was never fulfilled. That, plus the persistent rumors of what may or may not have happened during Hurricane Betsy, Salaam said, has had a lingering effect. "So when I heard on TV that there was a breach at the Seventeenth Street levee, I figured they'd done it again," he said. "Or, let's just say, I didn't automatically assume that it was accidental."

Lolis Eric Elie, an African-American columnist for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, told me he didn't believe that the levees were blown deliberately—"and most black folks with some education or money don't, either"—but he could "easily" understand why so many were suspicious. "Blacks, in a state of essential slavery, built those very levees that were blown up in 1927. When the ships came to rescue people, whites made damn sure not to rescue blacks in

Mississippi because of their fear that the blacks wouldn't return to work the farms. If black life is not valued—and isn't that what you were seeing for days in New Orleans?—then the specifics of the explanations are irrelevant. You begin to say to yourself, 'How do you aid tsunami victims instantly and only three or four days later get to New Orleans? What explanation other than race can there be?' I believe the real explanation is manifold, but I can understand how people start believing these things."

In Washington, whites dismissed The Plan as part of the "pathology" of poverty. Nevertheless, in D.C. and other cities, legends of conspiracy persisted as the counter-narrative to the conventional view of inexorable progress and the growing black middle class. Many in the population left behind could believe almost anything: that AIDS had been concocted in government laboratories as part of an anti-black conspiracy; that the government distributed crack in black neighborhoods as a genocidal practice; that the Klan has ownership interests in Church's Chicken, Kool cigarettes, and Tropical Fantasy soft drinks and uses them all to damage the health, and even sterilize, African-Americans; that between 1979 and 1981 the F.B.I. took part in a string of murders of black children in Atlanta. Scholars such as Patricia Turner, at the University of California, the author of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," have written extensively on the role of rumor and conspiracy theory in the African-American community, especially among the poor (and also on the phenomenon of wild rumors about blacks among whites), and they make a convincing case that these counter-narratives emerge from decades of institutional racism and from particular

episodes in American history, such as the use of hundreds of poor African-Americans, between 1932 and 1972, as lab rats in U.S. government trials, known as the Tuskegee experiments, on the effects of syphilis.

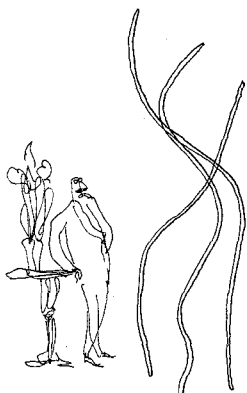
John Barry, in "Rising Tide," his book about the 1927 flood, quotes a New York *Times* account of a levee breach in Washington County, Missis-

sipi, in 1912. An engineer who had run out of sandbags "ordered . . . several hundred negroes . . . to lie on top of the levee and as close together as possible. The black men obeyed, and although the spray frequently dashed over them, they prevented the overflow that might have developed into an ugly crevasse. For an hour and a half this lasted, until the additional sandbags arrived." The *Times* called the idea "brilliant."

New Orleans was sixty-seven per cent African-American at the time of Katrina. It always had a substantial black population—it was one of the leading slave markets—and decades of migration starting at the time of Reconstruction made it even larger. The city was, in per-capita terms, the wealthiest in America before the Civil War and the wealthiest in the South until the nineteen-twenties. No more. Few of the improvements in urban America—the growth of the black middle class, the decline of the murder rate, greater attention to inner-city schools—have taken firm hold in New Orleans. There is hardly any industrial base, no major corporate headquarters, no home-grown businesses on the scale of FedEx in Memphis, Coca-Cola in Atlanta, the Hospital Corporation of America in Nashville. Colonel Terry Ebbert, the head of Homeland Security in the city, told me, "Drugs are the biggest business in town, bigger than tourism." Small wonder that at school-board meetings of Orleans Parish parents may think the worst—for example, that magnet schools are part of an over-all plan of educational disenfranchisement. Small wonder that they might believe that the break in the levees was a plot.

"Perception is reality, and their reality is terrible," Jim Amoss, the editor of the *Times-Picayune*, said. "We are talking about people who are very poor and have a precondition to accept this belief. Lots are cut off from mainstream news and information. They are isolated in shelters and they know a thing or two about victimization. It fits well into a system of belief."

In 1900, after a hurricane killed thousands in Galveston, Texas, the city died as a port and the rise of the port of Houston began. After the floods of 1927, John Barry writes, the city fathers



of New Orleans began their long decline into insular stagnation, Huey Long rose to power as governor of Louisiana, and Herbert Hoover, who led the rescue program, was elected President.

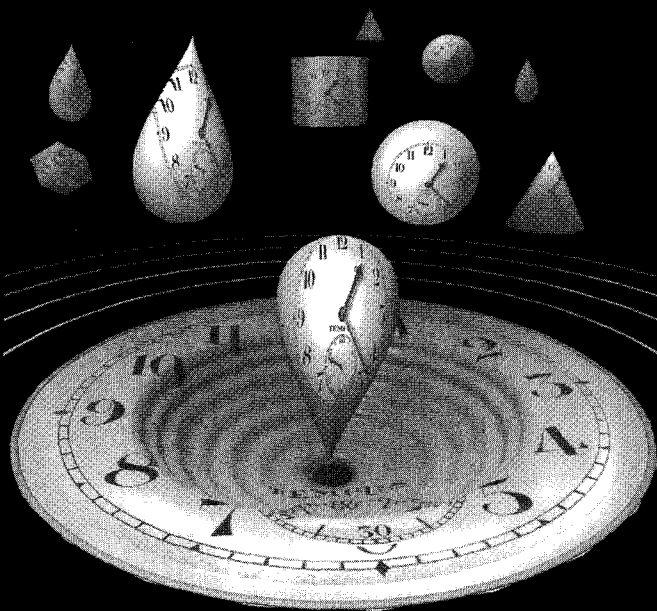
Catastrophe and displacement is not a subject only for the history books. The fate of a city can change in a single turn of the weather. According to polls, huge numbers of people now living in shelters say they will not go back to New Orleans. Few have insurance policies or even bank accounts, credit cards, or savings sufficient to start over. Many of them are sick or unemployed. As Hurricane Rita bore down on Texas last week, there were still roughly a hundred and fifty thousand evacuees in Houston alone. A poll conducted jointly by the *Washington Post*, the Harvard School of Public Health, and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation showed that fewer than half the evacuees in shelters will move back, and there was nothing in my days of conversations in Houston, New Iberia, Lafayette, and elsewhere that made that figure seem exaggerated.

Kalamu ya Salaam told me that he thought the suffering was far from over. Hurricane Rita has made recovery even more difficult. For the moment, people are focussed on the grace of their own survival, and are grateful for the small and large acts of compassion that have come their way. And yet, he said, "you are going to see a lot of suicides this winter. A lot of poor people depend entirely on their extended family and their friends who share their condition to be a buffer against the pain of that condition. By winter, a lot of the generosity and aid that's been so palpable lately will begin to slow down and the reality of not going home again will hit people hard. They will be very alone."

"People forget how important all those Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs are for people. It's a community for a lot of folks who have nothing. Some people have never left New Orleans. Some have never seen snow. So you wake up and you find yourself beyond the reach of friends, beyond the reach of members of your family, and you are working in a fast-food restaurant in Utah somewhere and there is no conceivable way for you to get back to the city you love. How are you going to feel?" ♦

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MAY WE TELL YOU OUR SPECIALS THIS EVENING?

BY LARRY DOYLE

We have several. For an appetizer, the chef has prepared a slaughter of baby salmon on toast points of nine grains—blue corn, barley, rye, chaff, stover, found rice, horse-rolled oats, balsa, and fermented teff flown in daily from Ethiopia—and fancy assorted nuts, which may contain up to ten per cent peanuts. The salmon is very fresh; it was hatched just this morning.

The chef is also offering a personal favorite, his hot spiced rocks. These are igneous and sedimentary varietals, half-washed and heated to nine hundred degrees Fahrenheit, then gleefully sprinkled with international peppers.

For the more adventurous, we have a selection of freshly purchased water crackers spread with unmarked pastes, jellies, and unguents found in the kitchen.

We are also featuring a tasting gavage, in which every appetizer on the menu is wheeled to your table and forced down the gullets of two to four people. The price is twenty-eight dollars per person, plus a nominal service charge. To accompany this course, the chef recommends a bottle of the Pete, which is quite sneaky tonight. It comes in cherry or mixed berry, and is served in brown paper.

Our special soup tonight is Georgian alligator turtle, prepared and presented in its own shell. This soup is served cold and slimy, and, in the traditional manner, with the head and legs attached. We recommend that you not touch the head, as it can snap your finger clean off before you can say, "Hey, this turtle is still alive."

In addition to our usual salad, our chef offers a faux tuna niçoise, which he is recommending not be eaten by anyone trying to limit his mercury consumption.

We also have an iceberg-lettuce leaf, wetted and centered on the plate.

With your soup and salad, the chef suggests two or three cocktails, and not cosmopolitans or candy-assed Martinis but real men's drinks. He is recommending an interesting Thai vodka that he

managed to get into this country; the "liquor" is chilled into an aspic, spooned into a shot glass, then served between the breasts of Alicia over there.

Before I tell you the entrées, there is one change to the menu: we are out of the pan-fried squirrel brains tonight, as our supplier fell out of a tree this morning.

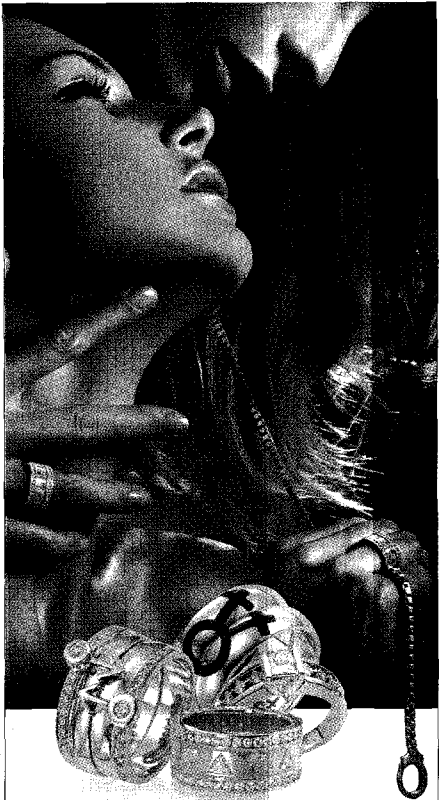
Our fish tonight is a Blue Happy, which is a euphemism. It is mostly filleted and sunbaked, then disinfected and served with what may or may not be capers. Blowholes can be requested for an additional charge.

The pasta is a single, comically long strand of spaghetti with a surprise at the end. The sauce is of no consequence.

And, finally, tonight we are offering a very special entrée that has been the subject of much debate in the kitchen. It is roast loin of Oliver, a pig that our chef has raised since infancy. Oliver was the runt in a litter of nine, and was, as you can see in this picture, bottle-fed by the chef as a young boy. Oliver grew strong and proud and was soon beating his siblings in their rutting games. Extremely smart, Oliver has thrice saved our chef from fires caused by careless smoking. However, in his latter years Oliver has grown bitter and incontinent, and just yesterday he ate the chef's brand-new cell phone.

Once we receive our first order this evening, Oliver will be smothered by a pillow filled with virgin goose down. This may take the chef some time. Oliver will then be hacked to pieces and charbroiled on a specially blessed grill. His loin will be laid to rest on a bed of tears, with asparagus and a confit of something. The chef would like to serve Oliver to you personally, and give a short eulogy. He will remain tableside, drinking steadily as you eat in silence. Because of the singular nature of this dish and its extreme emotional cost, it is priced at eighteen thousand dollars.

Would you like to order now, or do you need a few moments? ♦



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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

COUNTDOWN

John Adams and Peter Sellars create an atomic opera.

BY ALEX ROSS

At the northern end of the White Sands Missile Range, in the semi-arid desert of central New Mexico, a road stretches toward the charcoal-colored rockface of the Oscura Mountains, which rise to nearly nine thousand feet. At the end of the road is a neat circular shape, about a half mile in diameter. This is the site of the first atomic explosion, which took place on July 16, 1945. When the bomb went off, it obliterated the creosote bushes that had been growing here, along with every other living thing inside the circle. When plant life returned to the spot, grass and yucca plants took the place of the creosote. The change in vegetation explains why the site is visible from miles away, and probably from space.

White Sands is a mesmerizing place—an outdoor museum of mankind's highest ambitions and deepest fears. The missile range is still an active facility. Lately, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency has been using an area nearby to study the effects of explosives on underground bunkers. One corner of White Sands is occupied by LINEAR, the Lincoln Near Earth Asteroid Research project, which scans the skies for errant asteroids, particularly those big enough to cause mass extinctions. At the same time, the range functions as an unofficial wildlife refuge, the secrecy of the place serving to protect various species. It is home to herds of oryx, an African antelope. They are noble animals with horns like medieval spikes, and they can go for extended periods without water.

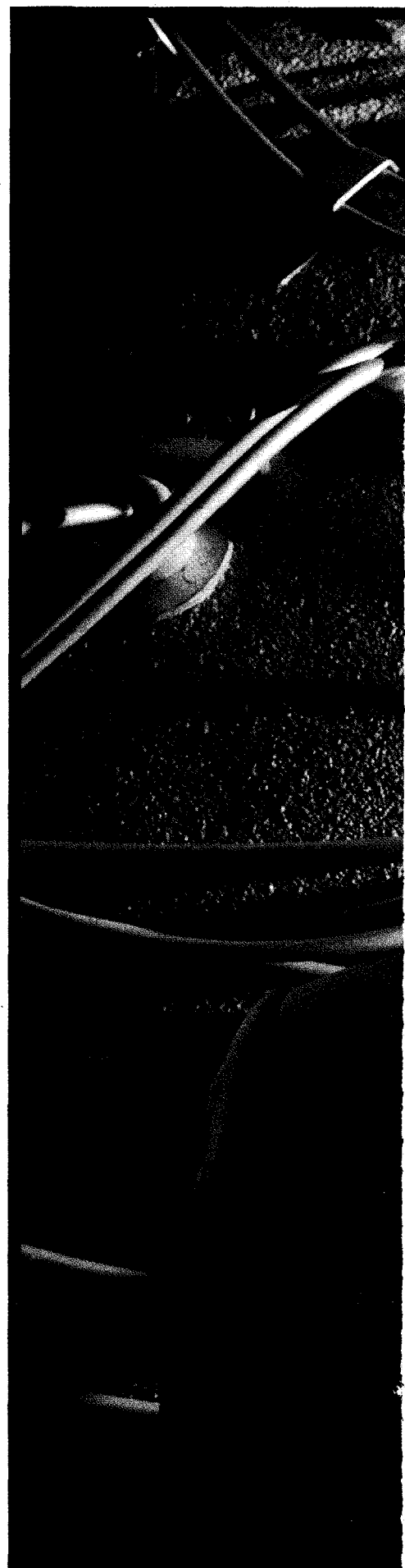
J. Robert Oppenheimer, the man who oversaw the building of the first atomic bombs, called the test site Trinity, in honor of John Donne's sonnet "Batter my heart, three-person'd God." The poem contains the words "break, blow, burn, and make me new." Oppenheimer was made new by the explosion,

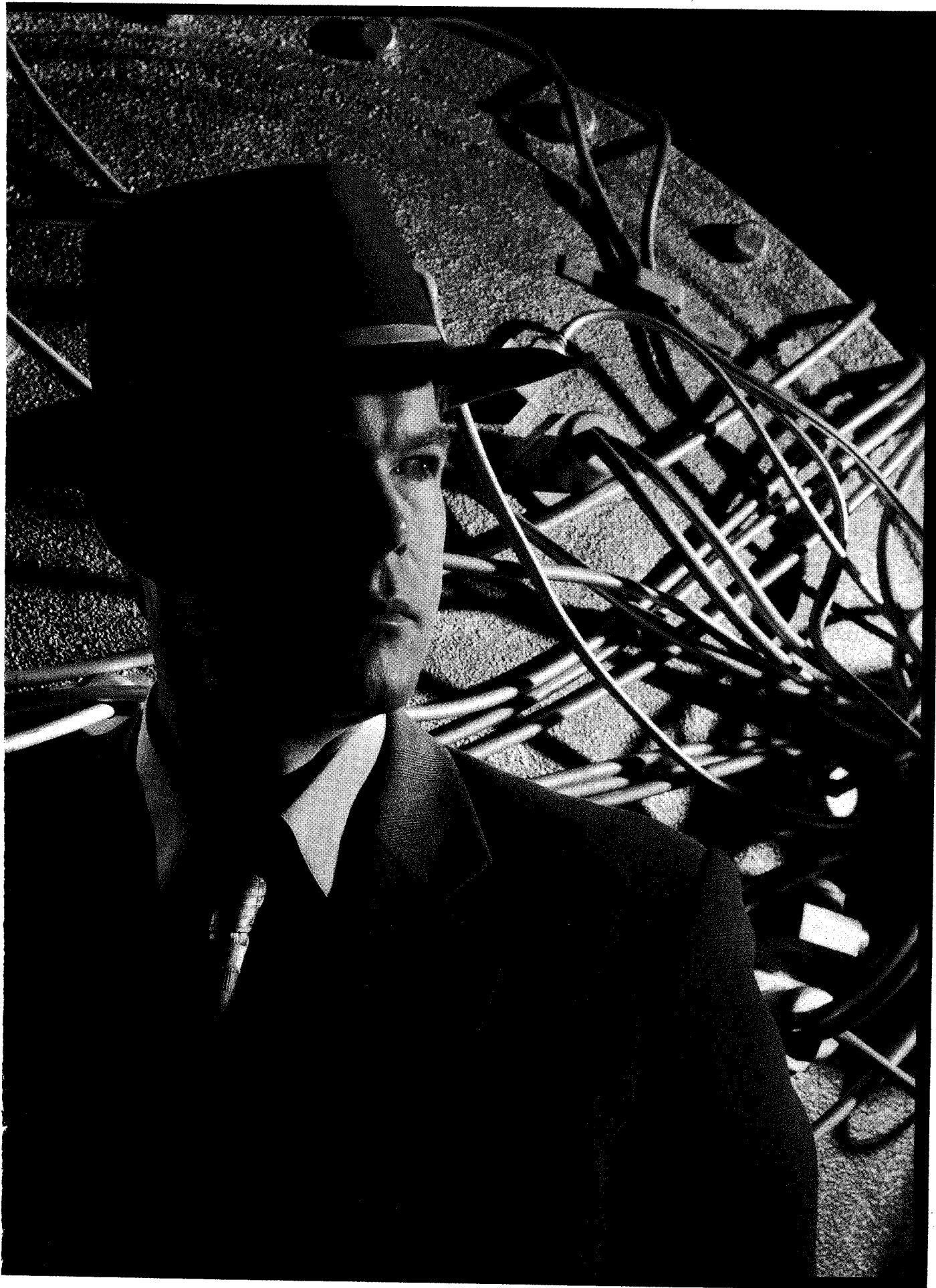
or, at least, was not the same afterward. The terrain beneath the bomb—Ground Zero, it was called—also underwent a transformation, which scientists are still trying to understand. When Trinity personnel came back to inspect the site, they found a green, glassy substance covering the ground. The latest hypothesis is that this artificial mineral, which was named trinitite, formed when soil, water, and organic matter were lifted off the ground and fused in the heat of the blast. Over the years, tourists have carried away much of the trinitite in their pockets—the site is open to visitors twice a year—and most of the rest was buried beneath the soil. Looking down at the ground, you would never know that anything out of the ordinary had happened here.

What happened at Trinity is the subject of "Doctor Atomic," a new opera, with music by John Adams and a libretto by Peter Sellars. The opening scenes take place at Los Alamos, the headquarters of the Manhattan Project, two weeks before the test. The rest takes place on the night of July 15th-16th, in the hours leading up to the detonation. It will have its premiere at the San Francisco Opera on October 1st.

"Some people claim that it's the world's first countdown," Sellars said to me, in a hotel lobby in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a few days before the rehearsals for "Doctor Atomic" began. "Every second is charged, because it is a new thing in the history of time—this massive pressure behind every minute and every second in a way that never counted before. At the end of the opera, you can feel the passage of time in the most real way, as with the Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, showing how many minutes remain until midnight. You get the hands of that clock, and inside every

Gerald Finley, who plays Robert Oppenheimer, says of his character, "Faust is the obvious connection." Photographs by Steve Pyke.





minute is a universe. A twenty-minute countdown takes forty minutes. From zero minus one minute up to the explosion takes four minutes. The music actually connects with the most formative experiences in your life, which you want to never live again yet you're living over and over—those moments when you were more alive than you ever were alive before or since. This is 'Götterdämmerung' for our generation, with our speed, with our tension points, with our nervous energy, but with nothing being a metaphor and everything being a reality."

Sellars—director of opera and theatre, activist, professor of "art as moral action" at U.C.L.A.—actually does talk like this. He speaks better than most writers write, moving through thickets of erudition toward exact epiphanies. His orations and incantations well up without warning, and break off with a giggle, or a profanity, or a burst of California slang. He has a compact, almost elfin body; his shoulders slope down sharply from his neck, and his feet pad the floor in short, quick steps. His hair shoots straight up, giving him the air of being perpetually electrified. He has a boyish quality, and dresses in boyish clothes. A typical ensemble may consist of cargo pants, an oversized flannel shirt, and a track jacket. Yet, when he is in the grip of one of his rhetorical tours de force, he takes on the look of an elderly sage: his head turns toward the heavens, his arms stretch upward in supplicant gestures, his face twists into an attitude of ecstatic pain. The blend of mental power and depth of feeling in one man is almost fearsome. But the most distinctive thing about him is his warmth: his customary way of greeting a stranger is to wrap him in a hug.

It was the peak of the atomic season—midway between the sixtieth anniversary of Trinity, on July 16th, and the sixtieth anniversary of Hiroshima, on August 6th. Books about Oppenheimer and the bomb were being published, seemingly, at the rate of one a week. Sellars, who was in town to direct a production of Osvaldo Golijov's "Ainadamar," at the Santa Fe Opera, pointed out that there were traces of atomic history all around: we were sitting a few hundred feet from 109 East Palace Avenue, the studiously inconspicuous front office for Los Alamos, where Dorothy McKibbin, Oppenheimer's gatekeeper, took in be-

wildered émigré physicists and sent them on the road to the laboratories, twenty-five miles to the northwest.

Sellars has long been in the habit of dragging opera into dangerous places. When he was an undergraduate theatre prodigy at Harvard, in the late nineteen-seventies, he staged an abridged version of Wagner's "Ring," with lip-synching puppets. In the eighties, in a series of productions both notorious and revered, he placed "Don Giovanni" in Spanish Harlem, "The Marriage of Figaro" in Trump Tower, Handel's "Julius Caesar" in Beirut. His first collaboration with John Adams was "Nixon in China," in 1987; the title more or less explains the plot of the opera, though not its dreamlike atmosphere. His second Adams collaboration, "The Death of Klinghoffer," ventured into the even riskier territory of Israeli-Palestinian relations and international terrorism. The librettist for both of those projects was Alice Goodman, who also was to have written the text of "Doctor Atomic." When Goodman backed out, Sellars decided to write the libretto himself. Or, rather, he decided to assemble a libretto from extant material, because he realized that the subject resisted a conventional treatment.

"My mother lived in Kobe, Japan, for five years, one hour away from Hiroshima," Sellars told me. "I went there several times, and there's a whole museum filled with bad Holocaust art. The great material is Kenzaburo Oe's 'A Personal Matter,' where the word 'Hiroshima' appears once. How to make a Hiroshima piece or a Holocaust piece—that's a really serious question. Art can't get above itself. It has also to recognize its own limits." He went on, "The nightmare of all art, as well as of all politics, is generalities. You cannot generalize. You've got to keep things as specific to the minute, as down to the wire, as possible."

The classic book on the Manhattan Project is Richard Rhodes's "The Making of the Atomic Bomb." Rhodes wrote it only after he had tried and failed to produce a fictional work on the same theme. Rhodes recently appeared at a panel discussion in San Francisco with Sellars and Adams—an event sponsored by the Exploratorium, which was founded by Robert Oppenheimer's brother Frank—where he reflected on the dangers of treating the bomb melodramatically. "This whole

story is slowly moving into a mythological compressed state," Rhodes said. "You have one person, Oppenheimer, and his scientists, and one place, Los Alamos, and one city, Hiroshima. Poor Nagasaki—we always forget Nagasaki every August. But, in fact, this was a huge project of a hundred thirty thousand people, on a physical plant on the scale of the American automobile industry by 1945."

Rhodes was impressed to hear of Sellars's prolonged immersion in the Los Alamos story. The libretto is an ingenious collage, stitching together declassified documents, transcripts of meetings, interviews with participants, and standard histories. Events are sometimes condensed, but almost every line can be checked against a source. The cast of characters includes Oppenheimer, in all his brilliant, arrogant, magnetic, cryptic glory; his wife, Kitty, seething against the confines of Los Alamos and losing herself in drink; Robert Wilson, an idealistic young scientist, who opposes the use of atomic bombs on Japan; General Leslie R. Groves, the oversized bulldog in charge of the entire operation; and Jack Hubbard, the Trinity meteorologist, whose predictions of thunderstorms drive Groves into an impotent rage. Lurking to the side is the Hungarian-born physicist Edward Teller, who is beginning to feel the resentment that will lead him, at the height of the Communist hysteria of the nineteen-fifties, to denounce Oppenheimer as a security risk.

Oppenheimer reveals his inner life by reciting poetic texts that had special meaning for him. In addition to Donne's "Batter my heart," the libretto features Baudelaire—a volume of whose poetry was in Oppenheimer's pocket at Trinity—and the Bhagavad Gita, which the physicist had read in the original Sanskrit. (He later claimed to have thought of a line from the Bhagavad Gita—"I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds"—after the bomb went off. Jack Hubbard's diary has Oppenheimer saying, "My faith in the human mind is somewhat restored.") There is little record of what Kitty Oppenheimer was doing or saying in this period; Sellars fleshes her out by giving her lines from the mid-century poet Muriel Rukeyser, whose life overlapped with that of the Oppenheims in fascinating ways (wealthy New York background; hard-left politics; vision-

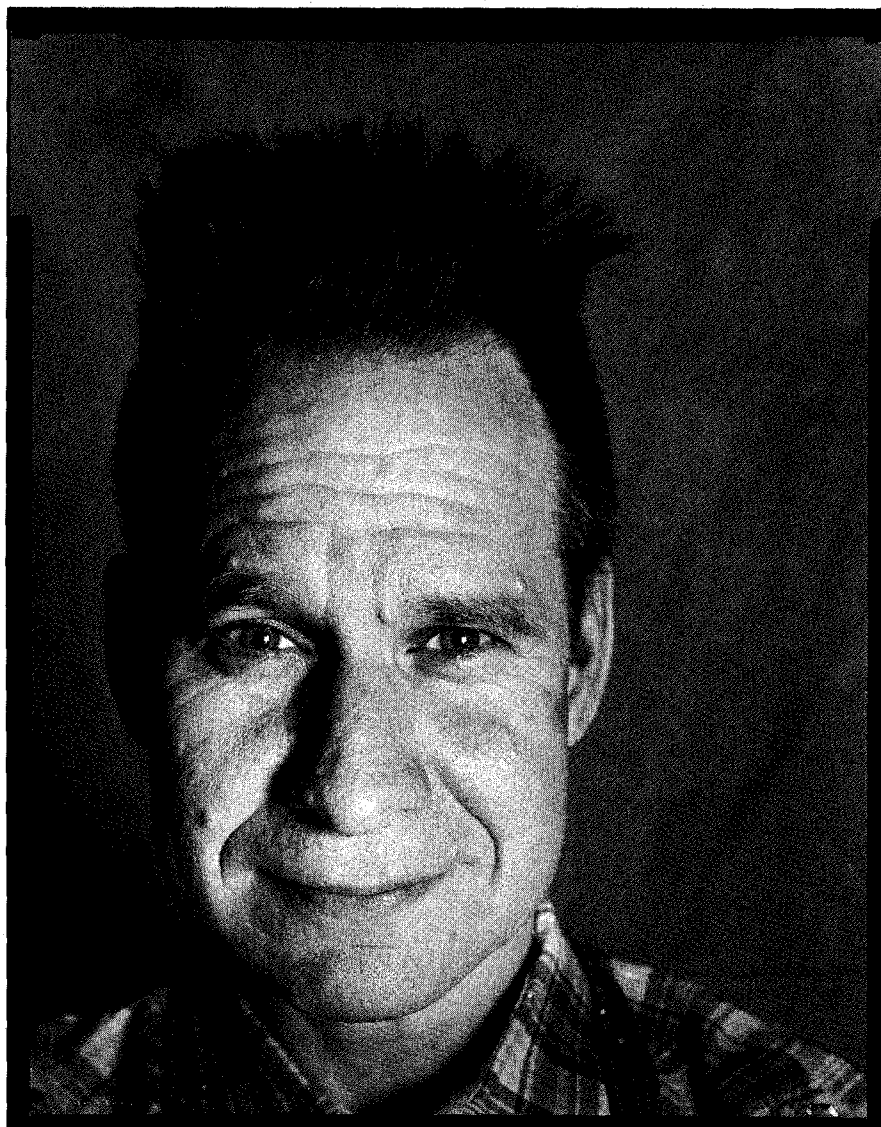
ary tendencies). And there is one semi-fictional character, a Tewa Pueblo maid named Pasqualita, who babysits for the Oppenheimer children. Many Native Americans were employed at Los Alamos, including, Sellars says, a maid with this name. It is not implausible that, during a summer storm, a servant would have comforted a baby with a Tewa song: "In the north the cloud-flower blossoms / And now the lightning flashes, / And now the thunder clashes, / And now the rain comes down!"

In Sellars's "Doctor Atomic" libretto, as in Oe's "A Personal Matter," the word "Hiroshima" appears once. In the first scene of the opera, which depicts a staff meeting at Los Alamos, Oppenheimer goes through a list of potential Japanese targets with Teller and Wilson. (Some of the dialogue is taken from a Washington, D.C., meeting that occurred a few weeks earlier.) When the physicist gets to Hiroshima, the strings and brass play a soft groan of a chord, containing multiple, clashing major triads, and then the dialogue moves on. That same chord returns, in modified form, at the end of the opera. Here the advantage of opera as a dramatic medium becomes clear. The characters do not know what is coming. The orchestra, brooding from the start, knows everything.

The first person to theorize nuclear weapons was the Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard, who, as Richard Rhodes relates, pictured an explosive chain reaction while crossing a London street in 1933. The first person to theorize "Doctor Atomic" was Pamela Rosenberg, who was appointed the general director of the San Francisco Opera in 1999. An administrator of sharp intellect, Rosenberg arrived with the conviction that opera should be more than an opulent entertainment. She decided that a new work by John Adams should be central to her tenure. Rosenberg has sometimes been a controversial figure in San Francisco, but her productions have had a strong impact, and few have faulted her for launching "Doctor Atomic," which will travel to at least four opera houses over the next few years, including the Met. Rosenberg leaves next year to become the general manager of the Berlin Philharmonic. She will, as she says, go out with a bang.

"I was doing this Faust series here, and wanted to commission an American Faust," Rosenberg told me one day, at a picnic table in the Presidio. She presented the idea to the opera's board of trustees; afterward, Michael Harrison, a professor emeritus at the University of California, at Berkeley, approached her. Rosenberg recalled him saying, "You

has found a language that makes sense to a wide audience. As a music student at Harvard, in the late nineteen-sixties, he received the gospel according to Arnold Schoenberg, who held that composers of integrity should flee the profaned temples of mass culture and cry out in a wilderness of dissonance. Adams bought into all that when he was young, and even wrote a let-



Sellars says that "Doctor Atomic" is "Götterdämmerung" for our time.

know, all your subjects are sitting over there, and they can't sleep at night because of the genie they let out of the bottle." She told him, "The man I have been thinking of is Oppenheimer."

Rosenberg zeroed in on Adams because she considers him "the greatest composer alive." Adams's ability to attract lofty epithets has aroused envy among his colleagues, but he has won his eminence fair and square: he has aimed high, he has addressed life as it is lived now, and he

ter to Leonard Bernstein chiding him for the tonal simplicities of "Chichester Psalms." He then began to find his way outside academic language, investigating the chance methods of John Cage and embracing New York minimalism. Most important, perhaps, he moved to Northern California, settling eventually in a house in the hills of Berkeley.

Adams and Sellars met in 1983, in the composer's home state of New Hampshire, where they talked over the

idea that became "Nixon in China." That opera and the later Sellars-Adams collaborations ("Klinghoffer," "I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky," and "El Niño") delved into what Adams calls "psychic complexes of American consciousness—Communism, the market economy, Presidential politics, terrorism, racism." Adams matches these sprawling themes with sprawling musical vistas, in which multiple forces are in motion. He can react to a huge variety of dramatic stimuli, and is as comfortable creating the peculiar Chinese-accented big-band jazz of "Nixon" as he is writing the hieratic Bachian chorales of the Exiled Jews and Palestinians in "Klinghoffer." His method is often to link a character or a situation to a favorite musical gesture or texture in his memory bank; he then extrapolates from that kernel to fashion his narrative. Mozart, Verdi, and Britten did the same.

Adams took a long break from large-scale opera after he finished "Klinghoffer." The protracted controversy over that work, in the course of which he was called both an anti-Semite and a terrorist sympathizer, left him discouraged; he began to think that the genre was not worth the trouble. When I interviewed him five years ago, he said that he didn't think he had another opera in him.

But the Oppenheimer story proved

irresistible. It offered him the psychic complex to end all psychic complexes. At the "Doctor Atomic" panel at the Exploratorium, Adams said, "I knew almost within the hour of first talking to Pamela that this was what I wanted to do." He went on, "The atomic bomb was the ultimate archetype, the ultimate looming presence. And I do remember, as a kid—I don't know how old I was, maybe seven or eight years old—living in the most secure, Steven Spielbergesque, idyllic village in New Hampshire . . . getting into bed one night, and my mother gave me a kiss and turned out the light. I heard a jet plane way, way high up in the sky, and I went into a panic, because I wondered if that was the Russians coming to bomb us." He said that the bomb represented a "dividing line in human history, when the human species was no longer riding along with the rest of God's creation . . . but suddenly was in a position to destroy the nest, to literally destroy the planet. That seemed to be a theme that was worthy of my time."

When Adams sat down with Sellars and looked through the sources, his eyes soon landed on some sentences in Henry DeWolf Smyth's pamphlet "Atomic Energy for Military Purposes," which was published just after Hiroshima: "The end of June 1945 finds us expecting from day to day to hear of the explosion of the first atomic bomb devised by man. All the

problems are believed to have been solved at least well enough to make a bomb practicable." A fast, relentless eighth-note figure—what Sellars would later call "the Stravinsky emergency music"—darted through the composer's head. A less promising verbal cue could hardly be imagined—had the word "practicable" ever been set to music?—but Adams had found his groove.

The working relationship of Adams and Sellars is intimate and complex. Each has his fiefdom, and negotiations between the two regimes are unending. Adams's control of musical matters is absolute. He entertains suggestions from Sellars, which are sometimes very detailed—"Give me something like the Adagio of the Bruckner Fourth," Sellars said of one passage in "Doctor Atomic"—but when Adams sits down to write, his inner voice often takes him elsewhere. The passage that was supposed to sound like Bruckner—Jack Hubbard's final weather report, shortly before the detonation—came out sounding like, well, John Adams. When the score was finished, Sellars was puzzled that certain choice lines had been unceremoniously dropped. But he was too thrilled by the over-all result to fret. Adams, for his part, retires from the field once rehearsals begin. As he watches Sellars at work, he comments on the musical execution rather than on the stage action. He may have reservations about the sheer amount of activity that Sellars sometimes unleashes onstage, but if he were to say anything Sellars would likely become all the more convinced that his instincts were right—the director is sunny and steely in equal measure. Adams is usually won over, and his gratitude is immense.

The strength of the partnership lies as much in its opposing traits as in its similarities. Sellars is pure charisma, enthusiasm, happy intensity. Adams is wry, folksy, detached, a self-styled and very agreeable curmudgeon. Sellars is outspoken in his politics, Adams more reserved. Sellars talks about the atomic story in terms of a battle between light and darkness, although he is too intelligent to confine his characters to one side or the other. In Adams's telling, the bomb bears down like Fate incarnate, inevitable and irrevocable. Sellars sees unexpected grace and hope blossoming around the explosion; his motto for this opera is Muriel Rukey-



"Do you think I wanted to get the paper towels with the ugly borders?"

ser's line "Love must imagine the world." Adams, too, supplies moments of dizzying beauty, but in the end he has written a three-hour symphony of dread.

It would be a stretch to compare the staging of "Doctor Atomic" to the Manhattan Project, but the undertaking is gigantic all the same. Under the troika of Adams, Sellars, and Rosenberg, a miniature city has been working to bring the opera to life. Some five hundred people are contributing to one or another aspect of the production. Only in the final week do all the components—singers, chorus, orchestra, costumes, scenery, lighting, and the rest—come together onstage; before that, most components are prepared separately. This being a Sellars show, there are extra complications. Lucinda Childs has been devising fluid, geometric choreography for a squad of dancers. At the core of the production team are three people who have worked with Sellars since the nineteen-eighties: Adrienne Lobel, the set designer; Dunya Ramicova, the costume designer; and James F. Ingalls, the lighting designer. They have devised an overarching color scheme for the show. Graphite represents the will to kill; "true blues" represent whatever remains of the human impulse; gray and ochre tones represent the muddled middle. The colors were inspired in part by a photograph of the mountains and sky at Trinity on the eve of the test.

The San Francisco Opera costume shop is in a cavernous three-story building on Ninth Street. Twenty-eight stitchers, drapers, and tailors are running up period garb for the singers, chorus, supernumeraries, and dancers. The supervisor for "Atomic" is Jai Alltizer, a soft-spoken art punk with a red-and-purple Mohawk and a long goatee. He has spent the past year trying to reconstruct the way people at Los Alamos dressed, and to master such arcana as the project's system of I.D. buttons, which were coded white, blue, or red to identify levels of clearance, and of temporary passes—"to let you come to the after-party," Alltizer joked. He showed me Teller's suits (graphite), Kitty Oppenheimer's dress (a watery-blue silk number, made from leftover Valentino fabric), and Oppenheimer's hat—a rakish porkpie, which was famous enough in its day to be pic-



"Mr. Blockert will see you, and raise you."

tured on the cover of *Physics Today* with no caption. It is being stretched and distressed to simulate the effect of conditions on the mesa.

The scene shop is in the Potrero Hill neighborhood, in an old steelyard warehouse. Last November, Jay Kotcher, the head scenic artist, and Jack Kostelnik, the foreman of the construction crew, worked with eight carpenters, four scenic artists, and a sculptor, building the scenery for the show: the huts and fences of Los Alamos; the tower at Trinity, on which the bomb was placed; an enormous protective container called Jumbo, which was never used; and the hundred-and-two-foot-wide sloping floor on which the action takes place. And, of course, Kotcher and Kostelnik built the bomb itself. For the frame, they used wood; for the shell, Styrofoam; for the skin, fibreglass. Lobel asked them to paint it a dull silver color, to give it a suitably ominous sheen.

Sitting in a cramped, dusty office next to the carpentry shop, Kotcher told me, "The fun part was coming up with all these doodads, these mysterious electrical things that come out of the shell. Lori Harrison, our master of properties, did some shopping and came in with a careful of miscellaneous weird stuff. A colleague of hers had gone to a restaurant-supply place down the street, where she found some liquor pourers—those spigots you see sticking out of liquor

bottles at a bar. We just glued them in the wooden box and stuck wires on them."

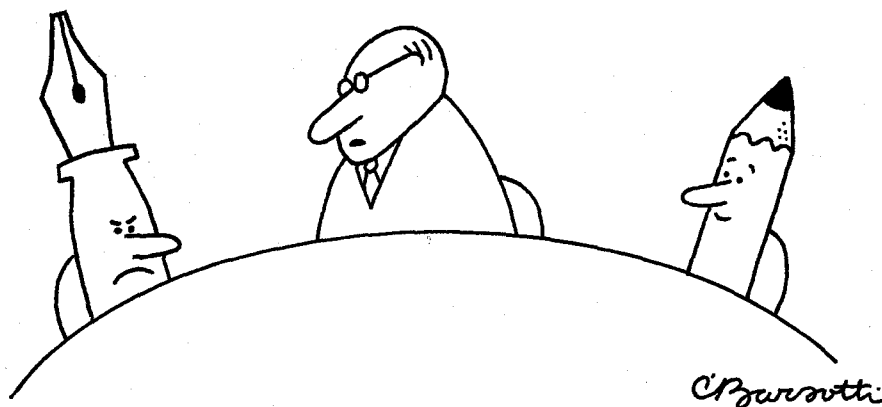
Kostelnik called up a spreadsheet on his computer to check how much the entire thing had cost. The original Gadget, as it was called, consumed hundreds of millions of dollars. The Kotcher-Kostelnik Gadget came in at \$30,164, including parts and labor. It had been moved to the backstage area of the opera house, where it sat under a transparent plastic tarp, glowering at passersby.

In a rehearsal space one block from the opera house, Sellars was working with a group of singers in a piano rehearsal. Adelle Eslinger, one of the music coaches, was at the keyboard, trying to summon up the sound of a hundred-piece Adamsian orchestra. Donato Cabrera, the assistant conductor, gave the singers their cues and sang the part of the chorus or vocalized a significant instrumental solo. Props were scattered around the room, to give the singers inspiration. There was a blackboard with a daunting equation written on it:

$$2 + 2 = x^2 + 2^* (3\sqrt[3]{CO}) / 10^3$$

Sellars and the singers amused themselves by scrawling new equations each day.

The session focussed on Act I, Scene 1, in which Oppenheimer, Teller, and Wilson debate the wisdom of deploying the



"He took it back—why can't you?"

bomb in Japan. The dialogue begins with a line adapted from Teller's memoirs: "First of all, let me say that I have no hope of clearing my conscience. The things we are working on are so terrible that no amount of protesting or fiddling with politics will save our souls." In Adams's setting of the words, the melody moves along in shadowy, groping fashion, the notes drawn generally from the whole-tone scale.

The man singing Oppenheimer is Gerald Finley, a forty-five-year-old Canadian with a firm jaw and a hypnotically expressive baritone voice. In the past few years, he has scored international triumphs in such mainstream roles as Don Giovanni and Figaro. He has also worked steadily in the less glamorous realm of contemporary opera, and seems happiest when taking on thorny, elusive characters. In the "Atomic" rehearsals, he was tireless in his pursuit of nuances, and often could be seen in the corner, puffing on a fake cigarette—Oppenheimer's chain-smoking is a leitmotif of the opera—and trying out different readings of a line. Like almost everyone involved in the production, he had become an enthusiast of the atomic literature, and, naturally, he had thought harder than most about the central character.

"He wanted to believe in the beauty of natural forces," Finley told me at lunch one day. In the opera, Oppenheimer speaks of the "brilliant luminescence" of the explosion. "When there was an imperfection, it would drive him crazy," Finley said. "Faust is the obvious connection—the craving for knowledge and the cruelty of having that knowl-

edge, if you like, and the punishment of having that knowledge."

Teller was being sung by Joshua Bloom, a young Australian baritone. He was one of a group of cover singers who were attending all the rehearsals, studying the principals' every move in the slender hope that they might be called to do the same onstage. Today, Bloom was happy to be standing in for Richard Paul Fink, who had been assigned the role at the last minute and was not yet in town. Bloom sang his opening line elegantly, with perfect accuracy of pitch. Sellars stopped him, seeking more.

"This whole night is about the atomic bomb," Sellars said, "and I want actually to begin with the most important words—that, at the end of the day, yes, it's wrong, and everyone knows it. Yes, it's wrong. When you say 'terrible,' terrible is"—Sellars paused—"terrible. Look at it in the eye."

"Terrible"? "Wrong"? As a New Yorker who thinks regularly about the possibility of a stray nuclear bomb wiping out not only my life but everything I love, I didn't doubt him for a moment. But I wondered whether the director was politically stacking the deck. He was, however, merely setting up one pole of the debate.

Oppenheimer answers Teller by archly quoting Baudelaire: "The soul is a thing so impalpable, so often useless, and sometimes so embarrassing that at this loss I felt only a little more emotion than if, during a walk, I had lost my visiting card." Sellars gave Finley an indication of what this allusion might mean: "It's like, 'Oh, really, Edward, you're worried about

losing your soul? Well, I lost my bus ticket yesterday. I was upset. That transfer is an extra quarter!' The most soulful character in the history of science is acting like a soul is a trivial thing. Get a little pyrotechnic with it. With your butterfly mind, just feel that you can literally go rings around him."

Finley ran through the Baudelaire lines in a lighter, airier tone. The words "visiting card" fluttered in the air, and the singer accentuated them by wiggling his fingers.

"Great great great great great great great great great great great cool cool cool cool," Sellars said, in about the time that most people would say, "Great, cool."

Later in the scene, Robert Wilson registers his objections to using the bomb in combat. The part is played by Tom Randle, who is the sort of singer that Sellars loves—alert to psychological detail, physically agile, extremely well prepared. (He often mouthed the words to other singers' parts.) Sellars urged him to invest his words with humanitarian passion and patriotic fervor. "What I always hate are right-wingers who say that progressives can't be patriotic," he said. Wilson's argument, in brief, is that the Japanese should be given more time to surrender, and if the bomb is to be used it should be dropped on an uninhabited area, as a demonstration.

Again, Oppenheimer engages in a masterly manipulation. Sellars said to his lead singer, "When Wilson starts speaking, would you start very slowly coming the entire distance—smoking, listening—and then say something that is going to be very unpopular with all these young people: 'What do we know about Japanese psychology? How can we scientists judge the way to end the war?' Be prickly. You're saying, Look, you've come this far in the countdown. Five minutes before, two billion dollars later, twenty thousand people working for two and a half years, and now you say, 'Uh, O.K., go home, thanks'? Physics in the last twenty years has become the most powerful thing in the world, the single greatest power in the history of the human race. As a scientist, you want to know if it works."

Randle nodded. "There's something sympathetic about this," he said, on behalf of his character. "I understand that, his curiosity."

Finley sang the words with his usual

nobility. Sellars instructed, "Gerry, come straight down, like a piranha. You have to be the bad guy, and what that means for you is to have to be the bad guy is what I want to feel. You're somebody who's into the nuances of Baudelaire and you're talking about 'Japanese psychology'? It's offensive, what you're saying. You're saying this just to provoke them." Sellars also said, "As you know, Oppenheimer is being grilled around the clock by these government security people about every damn thing about your past. They've missed Klaus Fuchs, who is actually reporting on the bomb to Stalin, and meanwhile you're being harassed on a weekly basis about"—Sellars snarled—"minuscule shit. These people will not rest until you are dead."

Sellars wrote his undergraduate thesis on Vsevolod Meyerhold and his avant-garde theatre of abstraction and defamiliarization. At the same time, Sellars studied Konstantin Stanislavsky's art of psychological naturalism. You could say that his lifelong project has been to try to reconcile the two giants of early-twentieth-century Russian theatre. He devises challenging, disorienting frames for drama, and then fills those frames with lavish knowledge of the characters' inner lives. If he sometimes seeks the unattainable—at one point, he asked one of the singers to "get Martin Luther King's entire 'I have a dream' speech in that melisma"—he never fails to provide the wealth of context and backstory that actors crave. Above all, he won't hang cards around characters' necks saying "good" or "evil"; that is why some people rejected "Klinghoffer," and why others may reject "Doctor Atomic." In the end, the main objection that can be levelled against some of Sellars's work is not that it presents a limited point of view but, rather, that it presents too many points of view. His productions, Andrew Porter wrote in *The New Yorker* two decades ago, are "meant for nimble minds."

The following day, Sellars rehearsed this same Act I scene on the main stage of the house. He was in his element, hollering instructions and channelling history as the dancers swirled around him, supernumeraries carried boxes of explosives, the women of the chorus sang an ode to the plutonium core, and the male principals ran through their

chamber play of protest and intellectual seduction. The composer was there, too, though you had to go to the back of the hall to find him.

Adams began "Doctor Atomic" in November, 2003, and finished it on May 24th of this year. He worked at a steady pace, hitting relatively few major obstacles as he went along. He composed directly onto thirty-six-staff orchestral music paper, without making an initial piano sketch. It's a bit like painting directly onto canvas without first pencilling in a drawing underneath. Although Adams solved some musical problems on the computer, using various forms of compositional software, he wrote out the score the old-fashioned way, by hand. The manuscript is a mammoth thing, taking up five hundred and forty-eight pages. It sits now in his studio in Berkeley, divided into manila envelopes.

For Adams, the tensest day of the process was the first orchestral rehearsal. It took place in a long, low-ceilinged hall on the grounds of the Presidio; Adams noted the appropriateness of first hearing the orchestral music of "Doctor Atomic" on a decommissioned military base. The composer walked in, saw an array of twenty gongs, and said,

"My God, what have I done?" He greeted various players, some of whom he had known since the seventies, when he was a hippie-ish instructor at the San Francisco Conservatory. He went over to a table at the front of the orchestra and sat down next to Sellars, who was studying the music.

Donald Runnicles, who will conduct the premiere, walked in with the two big volumes of the score under his arm. He is an amiable, shaggy-haired, unprepossessing maestro, a native of Scotland, who has been living in California long enough that his burr has softened. He has been the chief conductor of the San Francisco Opera since 1992. This week he was preparing not only "Doctor Atomic" but also "L'Italiana in Algeri," which would play at the opera's opening-night gala. When I talked with him at his favorite pub, a place called Liverpool Lil's, he joked about the absurdity of going back and forth between Rossini's frothy comedy and Adams's dire nuclear drama. He then drew a fascinating comparison between Oppenheimer and the figure of Captain Vere, in "Billy Budd." Vere's decision to send Billy to his death, he said, was not unlike Oppenheimer's decision to support the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima: each man wills himself to uphold the of-



"No, really, I love it when you talk in sentences."

ficial line, at enormous inner cost. "He conforms to the pressure of the state," Runnicles said. "But he's forever haunted by his decision."

Several times during the first rehearsals, Runnicles invited Adams and Sellars to talk to the musicians. This was an unusual move. Orchestral players like to concentrate on the technical nuts and bolts—Should it be soft or loud? When does the crescendo start?—and they tend to snicker at airy generalities about what the music means. So it was a bit brave of Sellars to stand up and chant Baudelaire. He then unleashed one of his verbal reveries, giving the players the same sort of Stanislavskian motivation that he had offered to the singers.

"In Act I, you're basically providing a lot of bad weather," Sellars said, standing on the tips of his toes so he could see the brass players and the percussionists in the back. "But when you make this thunder and do these sudden explosions it's not purely descriptive. You are indicating moral heights and depth of knowing. Those strange wind solos, for example—the oboe solos that play when

they are talking about radiation poisoning—they show how cancer works in the body, how radiation functions. Or these weird, dark wind chords: the physicists are saying one thing, but you in the orchestra are telling us there's a whole lot more. The Stravinsky emergency music keeps hammering, because people did not always have the luxury of making decisions in a calm, quiet place." He added, "It's a real honor to do this piece at this time in the history of our country. The arts are not just entertainment, sideshow, and distraction."

Whether these instructions made any difference was not immediately apparent, but, during the break, several players came up to Sellars to thank him. Then it was back to business as usual: adjusting balances, establishing crisp entrances, making sure that a fast figure was relayed cleanly from one section to another. The orchestra was mastering Adams's tricky textures, but, as the afternoon went on, their energy waned. By the time they arrived at the climax of Act I, Oppenheimer's recitation of "Batter my heart," they were tired out. Adams, who, a little

earlier, had been rocking delightedly in his seat, was now bent over his score with a tight expression, scribbling notes on a yellow pad. He decided, at one point, that it was too much to ask the double basses to play some high, spidery figures in unison, so he gave the passage to a single bass player.

"Donald should just send them home," he muttered. "They're beat."

Sellars, though, was transported by the sound. "John Adams," he said, "you have written an un-fucking-believable opera."

"Doctor Atomic" begins not with music but with noise: a two-minute electronic collage of industrial groans and screeches, into which is mixed the roar of airplanes, military voices, and a snippet of Jo Stafford singing "The Things We Did Last Summer." It suggests the buzzing of the innards of the bomb as it bleeds through radio static. All this will rain down on the audience from speakers that the sound designer, Mark Grey, has installed all over the San Francisco Opera House.

Jo Stafford's voice breaks up, cuts off, and gives way to a brutally dissonant passage for full orchestra, which feels like a detonation in progress. Adams had in mind not so much the explosion itself as the mental conflict of the Los Alamos physicists, who were mortally afraid of what would happen if their bomb did not work and no less afraid of what might happen if it did. Adams says that he was inspired in part by Edgard Varèse, who composed some of the most earsplitting music of the early modernist period. A recording of Varèse's work "Ionisation" apparently entertained some physicists in the Manhattan Project. But the real model is one of Adams's classic early works, his hyper-Romantic symphonic poem "Harmonielehre." The trombone and tuba have an identical floor-rattling figure (a rising minor ninth) in both works. What had been darkly exuberant is now exuberantly dark.

The chorus barges in with its report on the progress of atomic research. The manic, scurrying pattern underneath—the Stravinsky emergency music—indeed takes off from Stravinsky's Symphony in Three Movements, which was itself inspired by the images and sounds



"Want to bitch for one more lap?"

of the Second World War: newsreels of goose-stepping German soldiers, of "scorched earth" tactics in China, of Allied forces on the march. The great Russian exile began writing it in the spring of 1942, around the time Oppenheimer was organizing a team of Berkeley physicists to work on the bomb, and finished it on August 7, 1945. Listening to Adams's music, I pictured Stravinsky in a hut at Los Alamos, working away on an intricate problem of seemingly tangential yet ultimately crucial significance.

A little later, a kind of explosive fusion occurs: the two main elements of the opening section, the dissonant chords and the driving lines, are rammed together. Throughout the scene, there are premonitions of the detonation to come. The word "Hiroshima" is uttered, with its accompanying low-brass moan. When Oppenheimer rhapsodically describes the "brilliant luminescence" of the explosion, the winds swirl like particles in rapid motion and the strings play shivery tremolo chords. Many of these sounds are familiar from the forbidding archives of modern music past, not to mention a hundred sci-fi movies. There's a sense in "Doctor Atomic" that Adams is mobilizing the entire ghoulish army of twentieth-century styles.

In the second scene comes another shock, this one of beauty. We are in the Oppenheims' bedroom, in the middle of the night. The physicist is sitting up in bed. Kitty wakes up and sings a setting of Rukeyser's "Three Sides of a Coin": "Am I in your light? No, go on reading." The poem is used to conjure up Kitty's sardonic, plaintive, and finally angry attempts to command the attention of a husband whose mind is buried in the mysteries of the atom. Oppenheimer, after putting aside his work, answers her with the Baudelaire prose poem that begins "Long let me inhale, deeply, the odor of your hair"—the "opium bath," as Adams calls it. They can relate to each other only in these precious terms. Kitty acknowledges as much when she moves on to another Rukeyser poem, beginning "The motive of it all was loneliness": it suggests that the Oppenheims are together less out of love than out of fear. The interaction is edgy and charged, but Adams allows his music to become ravishingly sensuous. On close inspection,

those blaring dissonances turn out to be simple chords nested together. They detach, breathe, sing out. The Baudelaire suggested to Adams a very French sound—surging, shimmering textures out of Debussy. It's a drugged, drunken beauty, not quite real.

In the final scene of Act I, the action moves to Trinity, on the eve of the test. A violent storm breaks over the desert. General Groves, who is played by Eric Owens, bellows, in a Lear-like tantrum, "What the hell is wrong with the weather?" Later on, after much sound and fury surrounding the arrival, raising, and arming of the bomb, Groves drops his bluster and begins to talk about his various attempts to lose weight. The oddly haunting tone of this "diet aria" illustrates what I think of as the Gadget Effect: even the most mundane chatter takes on spooky significance in light of the bomb.

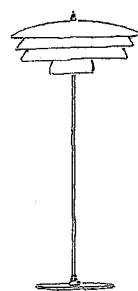
The crux of the opera arrives: Oppenheimer, alone at the bottom of the tower, sings "Batter my heart, three person'd God." The most telling lines may be the last: "for I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me." The aria is in the key of D minor, in the manner of a Renaissance lament, with a hint of synagogue chant; Oppenheimer sings a grand, doleful, nobly stammering melody, while the orchestra mimics the sound of viols and lutes.

"That music just sort of fluttered down and landed on my desk one day," Adams told me. "Part of me said, 'No, you can't do that,' and the other half said, 'That's it, go ahead and do it.' Afterward, I realized the reason it was right. Naming the site after a John Donne sonnet was itself an archaic gesture. Oppenheimer was always referring back to ancient things, summing up his state through very dignified forms."

Act II is one long hallucination. The low brass lean for long stretches on black Wagnerian chords; the strings emit clattering noises and sirenlike glissando tones. The electronic component intrudes more insistently, until it produces an almost continuous rumble. It's as if we were hearing the hum of power lines in the desert, the glistening of the grid. Weird shapes



emerge from the sonic gloom—sci-fi creatures, perhaps, including an irradiated version of the dragon of "The Ring." Pulses compete against each other; clocks tick away, but not in unison. They seem to speed up even as the countdown slows in real time. The chorus stops singing and begins muttering, or, at one point, shouting. It also erupts into a monumental,



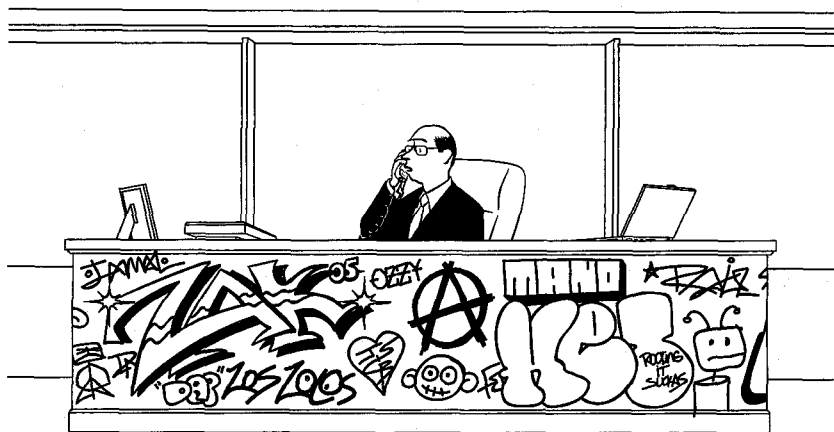
timpani-driven setting of verses from the Bhagavad Gita, a hymn of praise to Vishnu: "At the sight of this, your Shape stupendous, / Full of mouths and eyes, feet, thighs and bellies, / Terrible with fangs, O mighty master, / All the words are fear-struck, even

just as I am." Robert Wilson reflects that Los Alamos reminds him of Thomas Mann's "Magic Mountain."

The private world of the opera—the world of poetry and prayer—seeps into the "official" world of lingo and debate. The action cuts between Trinity, where Oppenheimer and the rest place bets on the kiloton yield, and Los Alamos, where Kitty is staying up all night with her maid, Pasqualita. The Rukeyser poems and Pasqualita's Tewa song become a constant, nagging presence amid the solemn jibber-jabber of the countdown. Sellars wanted to break up this mostly male melodrama by having women infiltrate the scene. Adams, for his part, keeps interrupting the general death march in the orchestra with passages of aching simplicity. You would never expect to find so much delicate writing for harp and celesta, or so many plaintive solos for horn and muted trumpet, in a work on this subject. So why do you remain tense as you listen? Because the other shoe must drop.

It is left to Kitty Oppenheimer, that volatile, alcoholic, widely disliked woman, to announce what Sellars sees as the moral of the opera. Act II opens with a setting of Rukeyser's poem "Easter Eve 1945," which tries to find rays of light in the blackness of war:

Whatever world I know shines ritual
death,
wide under this moon they stand
gathering fire,
fighting with flame, stand fighting in
their graves.
All shining with life as the leaf, as the
wing shines,



GREGORY

"Could I have a word with someone in building security?"

the stone deep in the mountain, the
drop in the green wave.
Lit by their energies, secretly, all
things shine.
Nothing can black that glow of life.

Some of Rukeyser's work is dense to the point of impenetrability, and some of it is tendentious, as Communist-inflected literature of the nineteen-thirties and forties often could be. Much of it, however, is breathtaking, and "Easter Eve 1945" is a masterpiece. It takes on an added power in the context of "Doctor Atomic": those images of luminous death play almost like a prophetic vision, as if Kitty, lost in her cups, were seeing the blinding flash to come.

The role of Kitty was to have been sung by Lorraine Hunt Lieberson. When that matchless artist withdrew for medical reasons, early in the summer, Kristine Jepson, an Iowa-born mezzo-soprano of rising reputation, gamely stepped in. Jepson is about as far from Kitty in temperament as can be imagined—ebullient, easygoing, self-effacing. But she soon found the sympathetic side of her character, who is, on the one hand, a neurotic, drunken mess and, on the other, the chief truth-teller and moral compass of the opera.

"She speaks only in poetry a hundred per cent of the time," Jepson told me, a few hours before her first rehearsal in costume. "She's having a vision of the mountains being on fire, she feels that she's hearing the cries of the children. All of those—if you want to

call them—hallucinations are very real to her." And the bomb turns her hallucinations into reality.

Early in the morning on July 16, 1945, Mrs. H. E. Wieselmann was driving over the border from Arizona to New Mexico when a huge light filled her field of vision. That day, she told the *El Paso Herald-Post*, "It was just like the sun had come up and suddenly gone down again." Dorothy McKibbin was watching from a hilltop near Albuquerque, and described the experience in terms that resonate with the imagery of Rukeyser's "Easter Eve 1945": "The leaves of the green native trees were kind of shining with the gold. It was different. Everything was different. The world was changed."

How to depict the detonation puzzled Adams from the start. He talked about the problem one day as we drove across the San Francisco Bay Bridge, on the way to a rehearsal. He knew better than to put a mushroom cloud onstage. "I can't compete with George Lucas," he told me. What he decided to do, in the end, was to visualize the explosion from afar—from the perspective not of the scientists in their bunkers but of the women back at Los Alamos. He sent a query to Richard Rhodes, asking whether the blast would have been perceptible from two hundred miles away. Rhodes told him that "people would have noticed a dawn coming from the entirely wrong direction." So Adams wrote a slow crescendo for trilling strings, to which is added a flash of

winds and brass—a chord that dazzles and fades, like a false dawn.

If "Doctor Atomic" is considered the saga of Robert Oppenheimer—and it is more than that—then the hero's final line is important. It is "Lord, these affairs are hard on the heart." The music seems like a reprise of "Batter my heart," but it falters after two bars. Oppenheimer begins the opera by saying, "The soul is a thing so impalpable," and returns many times to the soul, the spirit, and the heart. We are confronted, at last, with the question of Oppenheimer's soul. Pamela Rosenberg had asked Adams to write an American Faust, and his title had a Faustian ring, but the composer came to fear the implications of that association. Any sort of demonic narrative would severely oversimplify the situation of Oppenheimer and his staff, who conceived the bomb, after all, in the belief that Hitler was preparing to drop a bomb on them. (Hitler, it turned out, was perplexed by the idea of atomic bombs; he didn't like the idea that they might kill everyone on the planet.)

Once Adams was done, though, he admitted that the Faust metaphor still interested him, as long as it was not taken too literally. It helps to expose the blinkered mentality of the scientists, and particularly of Oppenheimer, who assumed that science had every right to discover whatever lay within its grasp, and that it was someone else's job to figure out the moral consequences. Oppenheimer once had this to say: "It is my judgment in these things that when you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success." As he read the literature, Adams seesawed between an intense admiration for Oppenheimer and an equally intense dislike of him. The physicist had a violent streak, and it is unsettling to read of his more bloodthirsty initiatives—for example, his notion, floated briefly during the war, that Germans could be killed en masse by radiation poisoning. Such a program would be worth pursuing, Oppenheimer said, if it could yield the death of five hundred thousand or more people.

Oppenheimer liked to float above the rest of humanity, not just intellectually but geographically. If you go to see the places where he lived, you notice that he made a habit of perching like an eagle on

the rim of the world. When he lived in Berkeley, he took a house high in the hills; it had the address No. 1, Eagle Hill. In New Mexico, he had a cabin on Grass Mountain, a surreally lush meadow at nearly ten thousand feet. He was instrumental in placing the Manhattan Project atop the Los Alamos mesa. In his youth, he said that his two great loves were physics and New Mexico, and that he wished he could unite them. And he did, but only at the price of ruining, for his own purposes, the landscapes that he loved. It's said that he felt the mushroom cloud hanging over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, where his cabin was. One tremendous passage in Adams's opera is an interlude called "Rain Over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains": it is nothing more than a tremulous chain of chords, one blurring into the next. I think of it as a radioactive cloud bearing down on Oppenheimer's aerie.

A few months before his death, as cancer was spreading from his throat through his body, Oppenheimer went to hear the world premiere of Stravinsky's Requiem Canticles. The same work was played at his memorial service, in February, 1967. It is no accident that the "chords of death" that end Stravinsky's valedictory composition—a tolling of spectral bells—are echoed in the chords that end "Doctor Atomic." There are nineteen of them, and the high gongs create strange resonances in the upper frequencies. Previously, during the countdown, time slowed to a surreal crawl, but now it seems to be racing forward, to the moment of Oppenheimer's death. It is also moving to a nearer destination, to the Ground Zero of August 6, 1945. How Adams succeeds in transmuting Trinity into Hiroshima is not something that should be revealed in advance, for it is the most dramatic turn of the entire opera, albeit one that takes place at low volume. It has happened, and it is about to happen again.

One day in early September, Sellars worked on the final scene of the opera with most of the principals, including Beth Clayton, who sings Pasqualita, and James Maddalena, who is Hubbard, the weatherman. The scene begins with Oppenheimer once more savoring lines of Baudelaire: "To what benevolent demon do I owe the joy of being thus surrounded with mystery, with si-

lence, with peace and with perfumes?"

Sellars went through the poem with Finley word by word, working out gestures and facial expressions. The singer got to the line "That supreme life which I now know and which I am tasting minute by minute." Sellars, uncharacteristically, made no comment. Finley asked, "Do you want anything special on 'tasting'?" Sellars responded, "Oh, God, yes." The passage ends, "Time has disappeared; it is Eternity that reigns now!" Oppenheimer, at this late stage, seems far gone, lost in the desert of his mind.

Maddalena stood all the way upstage. He is a longtime Sellars collaborator, and has given many piercing performances in the title role of "Nixon in China." In that opera, he played the troubled soul; here he plays an ordinary man who tries to keep his bearings. Sellars asked Maddalena to deliver his final weather report in a state of wonder, as if he were describing not the sky above but a paradise beyond it. As Sellars recited and meandered about, Maddalena walked right behind him, matching his gestures like a shadow. To Beth Clayton, Sellars gave the task of

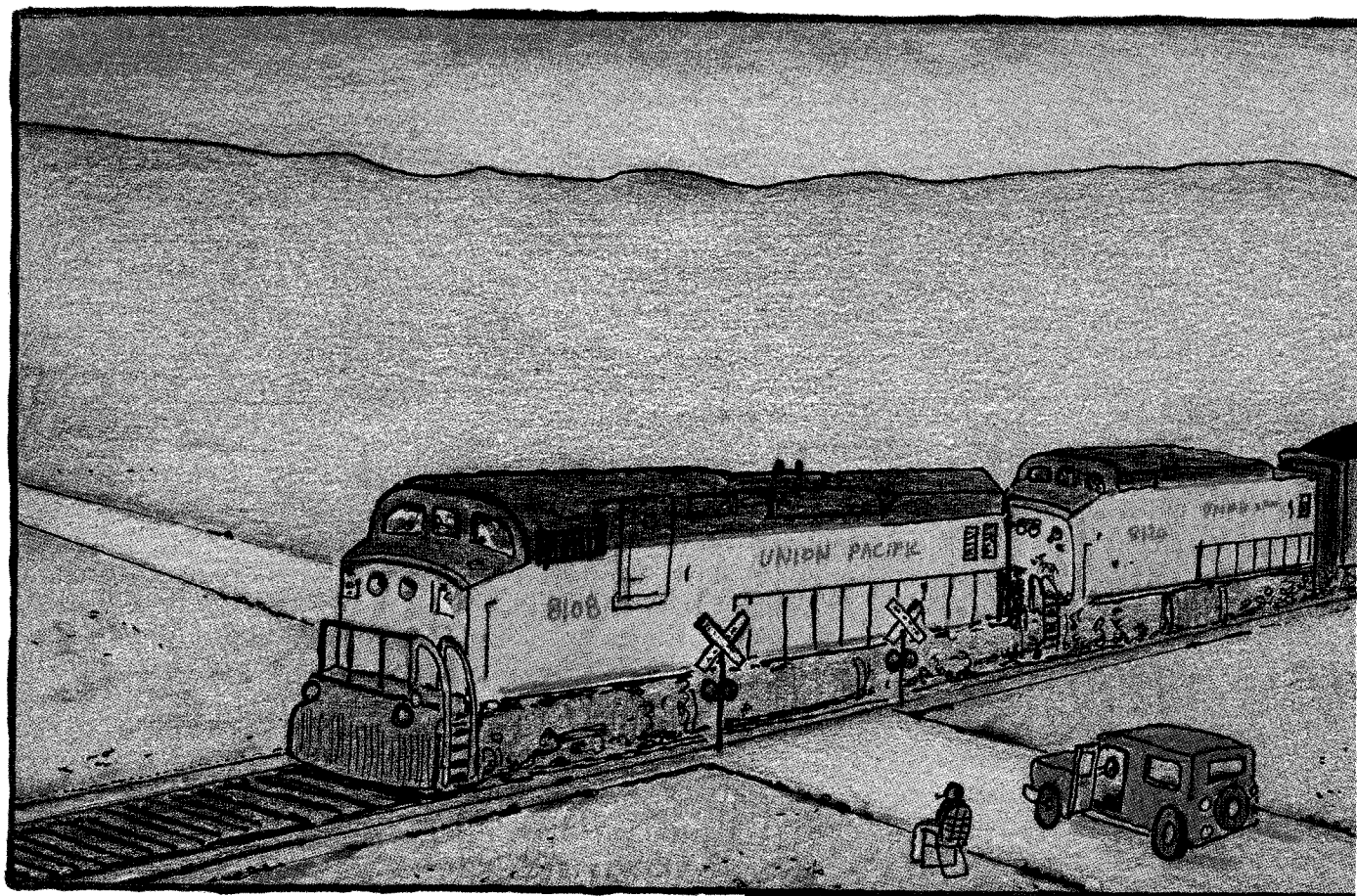
purifying and blessing the terrain; by the end, Pasqualita becomes a dream figure, perhaps a representative of the ancient Tewa people who once occupied the Los Alamos mesa.

Sellars's vision for the very end was not yet complete. He talked of having all the performers lie face down, arms behind their heads, as waves of light poured across the stage.

At one point, Sellars stopped to describe for Clayton the scene at Trinity today, even though he had never been there. "There is incredible regeneration in this world," he said. "The good thing is that this bomb is going to go off and fifty years from this night there will be wildflowers growing among the trinitite at this test site. All our private storms, which seem like the end of the world, blow over, and there is a new day. That's the deepest thing in life. The person who seems most hopeless turns out to be the very person who is the hope. There is some part of life that will never be extinguished and will always stay evergreen. I feel that some weird, strange hope exists in the created universe." ♦



"I would like to be supported, not by a man, but maybe by working animals—say, a troupe of tigers working in the circus, or two racehorses, or a dog who's landed a sitcom."



A REPORTER AT LARGE

COAL TRAIN—I

Disassembling the planet for Powder River coal.

BY JOHN MCPHEE

"C" was for coal train, "TS" for power in the Tennessee Valley, and "BT" for Black Thunder Mine. CTSBT was the proper name of the train, in the way that Broadway Limited, Burlington Zephyr, Super Chief, and Florida East Coast Tamiami Champion were once the names of other trains. Five Florida East Coast Tamiami Champions could not have filled a track beside CTSBT, which was seven thousand four hundred and eighty-five feet long, on this January morning in Marysville, Kansas, and was actually running shorter than most coal trains. There were a hundred and thirty-three aluminum gondolas (hoppers) and five diesel-electric locomotives—three in the rear, two of them deadhead. Replacing another crew,

Paul Fitzpatrick and Scott Davis climbed into the lead unit, after sending me up the ladder before them. We had slept at the Oak Tree Inn, a motel under contract with Union Pacific, in rooms that Paul Fitzpatrick described as "darker than the inside of a football." The rooms had been quiet, too, heavily armored against sound and light so that train crews could sleep during any part of a day. For us, the protection had not much mattered. The company's call from Omaha—as always, ninety minutes before reporting time—had come at 5:05 A.M.

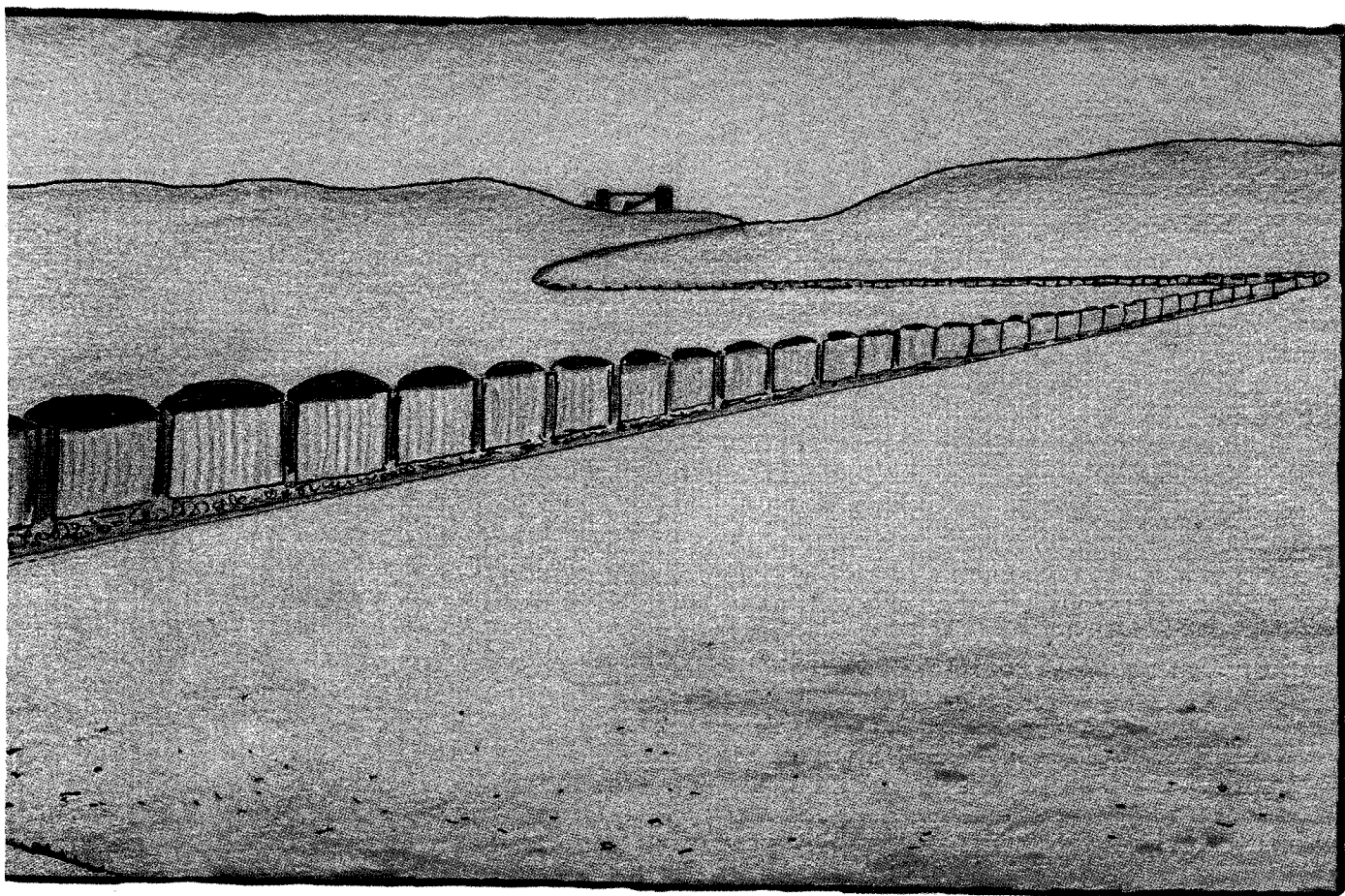
Heading north and northwest, we were soon going up the grade to cross the divide between the Big Blue and Little Blue rivers. Overnight, heavy ground fog had frozen in the trees, had frozen on

every weed, wire, and bush, so that—two weeks after Christmas—Kansas appeared to have been sprayed white for Christmas. From horizon to horizon, the raking light of the sun shot forth through the ice. Fields were confectionery with thin snow. Our eyes were fifteen feet above the tracks and more than that above the surrounding country. We got up to forty miles per hour ascending the grade.

The train could go that fast because it was so light. It was empty. The five locomotives and the mile-and-a-half length notwithstanding, the entire rig weighed less than three thousand tons. And now Scott Davis, the engineer, said, "I'm going to air 'em out, Paul."

And Paul Fitzpatrick, the conductor, looked through his track warrants to see

GLEN BAXTER



what restrictions may have been set up ahead. Then he said, "O.K., buddy, blow the dust out of 'em." Not that there was much coal dust left in those empties as we topped out at sixty going down to the Little Blue.

Winds that a train stirs up are not in the conversation with winds that can stir up a train. "If you're pulling empties, a north wind can take you from fifty miles per hour to eighteen," Scott said. In places like Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming, stiff winds have stalled trains. To wreck a train, you don't need a tornado. In Utah, between Salt Lake City and Ogden, winds coming out of the Wasatch canyons and crossing the tracks of the Union Pacific have knocked down empty ballast trains, empty coal trains, and double-stacked-container "intermodal" trains—events known collectively as "blowovers." In the Laramie Range, the Wyoming wind will shoot up a slope and lift a train from below.

"Tailwind, you get a little better speed, a side wind will slow you down,"

Scott said. From behind the cab windows of a diesel-electric locomotive, wind is difficult to assess. It can be blowing hard and you don't really see it, let alone feel it. "You're making fifty, then you're struggling to make forty-seven. You think, What's the reason? Wind? Or some problem with the train. Your curiosity is wondering why." Passing through towns, Scott looks for flags. He looks for wind socks at airports. But mainly he looks for the sweep of weeds in the ditches, for the legible motions in trees, and, if the weather is dry, for the speed of moving dust. We came to the state line and left Kansas for Nebraska.

Paul said, "Your intelligence goes up ten points when you cross that line. Back there, you go barefoot, screw your cousin, and try to steal something."

Paul and Scott are from North Platte, Nebraska, where Paul was born. Scott was born in Ogallala, fifty miles west. In the language of the railroad, their "turn" is North Platte to Marysville and back. They make the run at least ninety times a year—now and again, but randomly,

together. They know every siding, every crossing, every movable-point frog, every rising and descending grade. Train crews don't just go off in all distances and directions, like the pilots of corporate jets. Train crews work locally on memorized track and terrain. To get a coal train from, say, northeast Wyoming to central Georgia, you would need at least eleven different crews. The central figure in such an odyssey is not an engineer, a conductor, a dispatcher, a trainmaster—the multiple, replaceable, and redundant human beings—but the coal train itself, which, power and payload, end to end, will be integral all the way from mine to destination, no matter who is in or around it, or whose tracks it is running on.

Paul's thumbnail sketch of Kansans was in a category with his profile of ranchers in Wyoming, another of the six states that frame Nebraska. He described a public hearing at which a Wyoming official outlined a proposed program for the sterilization of coyotes. A rancher lifted his hand, and said, "We

Trains a mile and three-quarters long carrying coal can weigh up to twenty-three thousand tons. Nothing heavier rolls on rails.

don't want to fuck the coyotes, we want to get rid of them."

We heard the screech of wheels slipping on the morning frost. The sand light came on in front of Scott. He depressed a plunger, releasing sand. We saw an eagle where Paul had seen a bobcat in summer. We ate smoked trout, the result of a fishing trip that Paul and Scott had made together. We ate an excellent piquant meat loaf that Scott had brought from home. And we ate reconstructed turkey breast in Subway sandwiches, sheepishly contributed by me. They mentioned approaching landmarks as we entered the blocks in which the landmarks would appear: an Indian burial mound, other humps that had covered ammunition during the Second World War, an immense cottonwood at Mile 188 (a redtail was sitting in it), Rosie's Crossing (an unprotected farm crossing). "She raises hell if you block it."

All through the morning, we met loaded coal trains—on Track 2, coming the other way. Five in the first two hours. Seven miles of coal. In the loaded coal train CNAMR, we had come down the day before from North Platte to

Marysville, two hundred and fifty miles. CNAMR was on its way from North Antelope Mine, in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming, to a power plant on the Meramec River, a Mississippi tributary close to St. Louis. In Union Pacific hieroglyphs, the destination always comes last. Our CTSBT would fill up at Black Thunder Mine and emerge as CBTTS.

In the cab of a coal train, imagine the difference if the coal is there behind you. Trains that carry automobiles, mixed-cargo "manifest" trains, and intermodal container trains can weigh as little as four thousand tons. CNAMR weighed nineteen thousand tons. When loaded coal trains lengthen out to a mile and three quarters, they can weigh as much as twenty-three thousand tons. Nothing heavier rolls on rails. Diesel power on its own could scarcely budge that kind of weight. The diesel engines inside locomotives are there to generate electrical power. Separate electric motors turn each of the six axles. To move the throttle to Notch 1 and start up such a thing is to wait for perceptible motion. Soon after Notch 2, the pressure of acceleration

comes into your chair and begins to run up your back. Move the throttle to Notch 3, and you may feel that you are driving the North American Plate.

Paul said, "It's a touch."

Scott said, "You feel the train in the seat of your pants."

After Notch 4, even your underwear can feel the train attenuate. By Notch 5, you are beginning to develop an interest in whatever might be happening a couple of miles ahead. Notch 8 and you are flat out—minding the loaded speed limit, fifty miles an hour—and thinking ahead at least one county. Below Notch 1 are two neutral stages—called Set Up and Idle—and below them are the eight notches of the dynamic brakes. Across the dynamics, you can feel the coal pressing on your back, feel the train condense. There could be an off-the-wall analogy to a twenty-speed bicycle but it does not immediately come to mind. Beside the track from time to time, you see a small post with a black X on it—seemingly no larger than a playing card. It signifies your proximity to a grade crossing—any kind of grade crossing. A farm crossing with no signs. A signed crossing from the era of Stop Look & Listen. A crossing armed with blinking lights. A crossing armed with blinking lights and automatic gates. A whistle-guard crossing that plays a recording that sounds like a train. In the two hundred and fifty miles of the North Platte-Marysville turn, there are a hundred and forty-one X's beside the track, a hundred and forty-one grade crossings. If you are driving a train past them, at each X you depress on the console before you a metal mushroom that would not be out of place in a pinball machine. As it sinks into the console under the butt of your hand, the locomotive produces its classic sound. Or, as the clarinetist Skip Livingston emailed the tubist Tom Spain, "I've been listening carefully. The trains differ—different locomotives have different pitches to their horns. But I did hear one while I was moving snow on Sunday morning, and I was able to get to the piano before I lost the notes. They were A sharp, E, and F sharp below middle C, which made it sound like an F-sharp-7 chord (minus the C sharp). The instruments that would come closest to the sound would probably be trombones."

Passing an X, you first play one long



"Does anyone else's robe say 'Hyatt'?"

chord on the mushroom. Then you repeat it. Then you tap a short toot. Then, if you are virtuoso, you play a final long chord that begins to fade exactly when you nose over the crossing. With so much to do, your hands are almost always touching something on the console. But if you let fifteen seconds go by while you do nothing at all, the alerter will let out a full-scale pentatonic scream. The alerter is the modern version of the "dead man's pedal." The old engineers had to keep down that pedal or their trains would screech to a halt. Now the alerter screeches, and goes on screeching like a smoke detector, until you come to and force it to shut up. The alerter has its own mushroom.

Paul sat on the left—conducting. He had his own speedometer, his own mushroom for the horn. He had his thick sheaf of papers full of orders and warrants. He wore a beige baseball cap with red lettering that said "Cornhuskers." Lanky and limber, spectacled and scholarly, he was fifty-seven, and under the cap he hadn't much hair. Scott, far right, looked down into computer screens and up at cab signals, which reproduce inside the locomotive the signals outside, along the track, and are more than helpful in mist and fog. He was fifty-four—and, as it happened, five feet four—and under his red University of Nebraska ball cap was a receding brush cut. Their two seats were like upholstered thrones, as was a third, between and behind them. They had refrigeration, bottled water, and—a few steps forward and down toward the front door—a hand-cranked toilet of the type that is found on private vessels. No toilet paper in the toilet. No sink. No mirror. This was not the yacht *Britannia*. Toilet paper is in individual crew kits supplied at terminals by the company.

The space that contained us was as warm as an office. For Scott and Paul, it hadn't always been so. In older locomotives on days like these—fifteen degrees below freezing—Paul had soaked paper towels in water and lined the door jamb with them so they would stiffen up and prevent the gelid atmosphere from taking over the cab. Paul and Scott had had much to do with the conditions of the workplace, and the pay, the hours, the rotations of the pool. In this district, Paul was the chairman of the United Transportation Union and, until recently, Scott



"Encouraging dissent is a good way of finding out who the traitors are."

had been the chairman of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen. Crews are paid by the trip. After you finish a trip and "tie up" on a computer, your place in the rotation starts at the bottom and rises through the pool, the collective term for turns in the district. The smaller the pool, the readier the work, clearly—but perhaps so ready that you are not adequately rested before your next company call. So there is paradox in the pool, augmenting the heavy tensions between labor and management that date from the nineteenth century. Scott's brotherhood of engineers is the oldest union in the country. "Management's strategy is divide and conquer," Paul remarked, and changed the subject to plan their next fishing trip. Scott has a twenty-foot Crestliner 202 Tournament, with two live wells, a 175-horse Evinrude, a 15-horse Evinrude kicker, and an electric motor as well. In Kansas City two years back, Paul bought Scott a T-shirt that said "UNION FISH STRIKE MORE."

Scott took a dip of Levi Garrett. Paul said, "I've only got one bad habit, and that's working on the U.P."

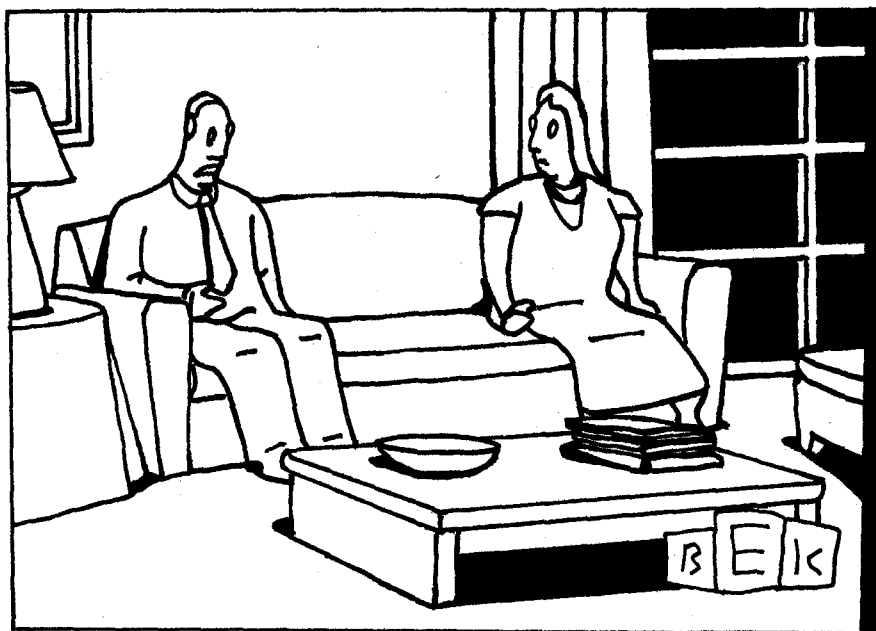
Paul's grandfathers were engineers. One went west from North Platte. The other went east from North Platte. Paul's father was a conductor. After two years in college, Paul "hired out on

the railroad," but was soon drafted and sent to Vietnam. Later, he was a switchman, then a yardmaster, and then "came out on the road as a brakeman," and was promoted to conductor in 1976. Scott Davis's great-grandfather was a fireman who "got hurt and became a physician." Scott's father was a building contractor who moved where work required. As a result, Scott went to three high schools—in Ogallala, Stapleton, and Hyannis.

Paul: "He was voted the most popular sophomore three years in a row."

Scott joined the Union Pacific when he was twenty-three. He dug ditches on a signal gang, climbed poles, and "became a fireman just when the coal thing was starting." As an engineer, he took his first train by himself to Scottsbluff, on Thanksgiving, 1976. He "waited all day for B.N.S.F. to bring coal." For Thanksgiving dinner, he ate day-old rolls.

The coal thing would change their lives—their workplace, their leisure time, their relative prosperity. From mines near the center of America, the coal thing would revolutionize American railroads, slow the spread of creeping desuetude, reverse—to a large extent—their antiquation. Before the end of the twentieth century, it would all but jam solid the busiest trackage. It was the direct economic result of the Clean Air



"Let's just stay in and contribute to the disappointing weekend box-office."

Act of 1970. The immense coal reserves of northeastern Wyoming had been no secret to anybody, of course, least of all to geologists. While a good coal seam in Pennsylvania might be seven feet thick, drill cores and seismology had long shown coal beds a hundred feet thick in the Fort Union formation of Wyoming. There was a small mine from the era of steam locomotives, but on a larger scale no one was interested in this vast domain of coal, because there was comparatively little heat in it. In British thermal units, it was thirty per cent poorer than Appalachian bituminous coal. So the open range above the Powder River coal was not further opened. Ranchland ran to the horizon in an absence of artificial light. That part of Wyoming—in its vegetation, wildlife, and vacant beauty—had been well characterized in 1960 by the establishment there of a national grassland.

Beyond the detriments of Powder River Basin coal was the signal fact that it was as much as five times lower in sulfur than Appalachian coal. With the Clean Air Act, power plants were required to scrub sulfur out or burn low-sulfur coal. The five hundred power plants that use coal to light, heat, cool, and compute fifty-two per cent of just about everything in the United States were suddenly swivelling their attention

to Powder River coal. A combination of companies built the Orin Line—the longest new rail line in the United States since the nineteen-thirties. At various sites along the Orin Line, large machines removed a hundred feet of overburden to begin an invasion of the planet unprecedented in scale. Belle Ayr, Black Thunder, North Antelope, Jacobs Ranch—in fewer than twenty years, mines of the Powder River Basin were the largest coal mines in the history of the world.

Coal trains go into the Powder River Basin like tent caterpillars up a tree. The Orin Line is not much more than a hundred miles long, but sixty-five loaded coal trains—collectively, a hundred miles of rolling coal—come down it on an average day. Sixty-five empties go into the mines, and sixty-five loads emerge. They go to Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia; they go to Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and everywhere between. They are unit trains—each a so-called "set," each on its way (with few exceptions) to one specific power plant.

CTSBT, having come up through Alexandria, Belvidere, Carleton, Davenport, Edgar, Fairfield, Glenvil, and Hastings—alphabetical Nebraskan railroad towns—was now descending among the farms of Hayland Hill, nearing the Platte

River. Paul said, "In Nebraska, they bury a farmer only three feet under."

I said, "O.K., why?"

With an air of stating the obvious, Paul said, "So he can still get a hand out."

Scott said, "A wealthy farmer has two mailboxes."

Beyond the broad and braided Platte was Gibbon Junction, where the two-track line from Marysville met the U.P.'s Triple-Track Main. Like the on-ramp of a freeway, the lesser tracks went through a long curve to make an acute angle with the main. Reading signals, Scott had gone down from notch to notch through the dynamics, and was now drifting, as he put it—creeping slowly around the curve until his nose was in the angle, where he stopped. Parked there was a Dodge Grand Caravan—Texas S53ZNT—with a man in it who was taking pictures. The Triple-Track Main—Gibbon Junction through North Platte to O'Fallons, Nebraska—is the most heavily used freight line in the world. Gibbon Junction joins southern traffic to central traffic running east and west. Since the blending of tracks there occurs in fewer than six acres, it is the sort of place where espionage leading to sabotage could be particularly effective. This apparently trespassing man, on a bitter-cold January morning, had left a grade crossing, driven on ballast beside the tracks, and squeezed his Grand Caravan into the narrowest part of the junction V, where his lens was on us. While we sat and waited for an east-bound coal train to go by on its way to Council Bluffs, the van backed across the double tracks and into virgin snow, where the camera returned to action.

Since the eleventh of September, 2001, scenes like that have made certain people extremely nervous, but not Paul or Scott. "These train buffs, they'll do anything," Paul said. "I've had them driving down the highway taking pictures of the train." Throwbacks to the nineteenth century, train watchers, known in England as train spotters, are people who go on planned outings to look at trains. They are sometimes described as a dying breed, but the Reaper evidently is not impatient. In the United States currently, there are well over a hundred thousand train watchers, a national subculture whose antique passion is accompanied by a knowledge of rail-

roading that often has greater breadth and depth than the sophistication of most people who work for railroads. Where tracks are, they are; but they tend to cluster. At Tower 55, in Fort Worth, where the Union Pacific crosses the Burlington Northern Santa Fe, a guy was seen making notes. In no time, the F.B.I. showed up and confiscated his notebook. Never mind that he was only a train watcher taking time off from his job as a police dispatcher.

A Wyoming-coal train is not a common sight in New England. Run one into New Hampshire for a test burn at Bow, on the Merrimack River, and word of its coming will quickly spread. Think of it. Three B.N.S.F. diesel-electrics in distributed power coming through the mending wall. A mile and a half of Powder River coal. Train watchers will meet it in western New York and follow it all the way in like bait fish escorting a whale. My cousin John, in Northern California, is a train watcher. He says he's "going train-ing" and he disappears. When he gets out there, he knows what he is looking at.

Some years ago, I was at a kitchen party in the home of Willy Bemis, in Amherst, Massachusetts. The room was full of biologists, full of shoptalk, beer, wine, the shouts of children, the contributions of a barking dog. Willy is a world-renowned anatomist of living and fossil fishes, and these were his graduate students and colleagues at the University of Massachusetts, chatting fish, while off in a corner where a source of incidental music might have been was a TV monitor with a video in it showing nothing but slowly moving trains—whole trains, coal trains, intermodal, manifest, autorack American trains. When seven thousand feet of train had lumbered across the screen, the screen was entered by another train. I thought I was looking at a screen saver, but it was a quantum less lively. If Andy Warhol had rotated the Empire State Building ninety degrees, he could have approached the mesmerism of those endless trains. Willy, who has since taken up a distinguished professorship at Cornell, knows almost as much about trains as he does about fish.

The Andy Warhol of those trains in Willy's kitchen was Dick Eisfeller, of Greenland, New Hampshire, a train watcher who long ago turned pro and has made nearly two hundred videos, many

of them longer than Hollywood feature films. Beside selected tracks, he films, without sleep, every train that moves past him for twenty-four consecutive hours. Completing his editing at home, he dims the rumbling sound track from time to time and tells you in a soft monotone what is going by, what its destination is, and how it relates to the national plexus of rail freight. He is not without competition, but while others show two locomotives, four boxcars, and six giddy gorges, Eisfeller is uninterested in scenery, and he alone consistently shows whole trains on one stretch of track across twenty-four hours and comments on every train. "Others sell thousands, I sell hundreds" is the way in which he summarizes his market niche. Willy Bemis says that among the train videomakers Dick Eisfeller is "probably the most knowledgeable, the most interested in railroad operations. He has an almost

scientific approach, a mission to document things. He's interested in the business of the railroad. He knows where a train is coming from and where it is going, and whether it is daily or weekly, and whether it is on time. He knows what is in the cars. He knows the context of other trains on the same tracks."

In me, there was nothing of the train watcher, train spotter, train buff, or rail fan until there came a day when Willy Bemis (about to move, and cleaning out his house) sent me his collection of Eisfeller films. In twenty-one hours of stupefied absorption, I watched whole trains in the "Kansas funnel," whole trains on the Orin Line, whole trains in Nebraska on the Triple-Track Main. A very large percentage were coal trains, half a light-year of coal trains, bright aluminum coal trains, the coal convex in each car, like rounded tablespoons of black sugar. The title of one of Eisfeller's films



"It's the dog."

FUGUE

1.
I was the man because I was taller.
My sister decided
when we should eat.
From time to time, she'd have a baby.
2.
Then my soul appeared.
Who are you, I said.
And my soul said,
I am your soul, the winsome stranger.
3.
Our dead sister
waited, undiscovered in my mother's head.
Our dead sister was neither
a man nor a woman. She was like a soul.
4.
My soul was taken in:
it attached itself to a man.
Not a real man, the man
I pretended to be, playing with my sister.
5.
It is coming back to me—lying on the couch
has refreshed my memory.
My memory is like a basement filled with old papers:
nothing ever changes.
6.
I had a dream: my mother fell out of a tree.
After she fell, the tree died:
it had outlived its function.
My mother was unharmed—her arrows disappeared,
her wings
turned into arms. Fire creature: Sagittarius.
She finds herself in—

- a suburban garden. It is coming back to me.
7.
I put the book aside. What is a soul?
A flag flown
too high on the pole, if you know what I mean.
 - The body
cowers in the dreamlike underbrush.
 8.
Well, we are here to do something about that.

(In a German accent.)
 9.
I had a dream: we are at war.
My mother leaves her crossbow in the high grass.

(Sagittarius, the archer.)
 - My childhood, closed to me forever,
turned gold like an autumn garden,
mulched with a thick layer of salt marsh hay.
 10.
A golden bow: a useful gift in wartime.

How heavy it was—no child could pick it up.

Except me: I could pick it up.
 11.
Then I was wounded. The bow
was now a harp, its string cutting
deep into my palm. In the dream

it both makes the wound and seals the wound.

was "24 Hours at Gibbon Junction."

Eisfeller is a chemist with patents on coatings that make your car look metallic where it is actually plastic. "The key ingredient is indium. If you evaporate it in a vacuum on a plastic surface, it forms little islands, so if you coat it with clear plastic it doesn't corrode." He worked for Textron until 1994, when he was downsized for being, in his word, outspoken. He had sold his first video a year earlier, and decided to go into the field full time. He had been a rail fan since childhood. In Chadwick, Illinois, Burlington Zephyrs went through his grandparents' farm.

In his twenties, he "started chasing trains" and "collecting paper"—timetables, schedules, dispatcher sheets, consists. (Accented on the first syllable, "consists" is a railroad term for what a train is carrying.) Eisfeller goes into railroad yards, opens Dumpsters, and rummages through them for consists. He knows people in railroad companies who give him lineups—lists of trains expected at a given point within a specified number of hours. In his laptop, he has a topographic atlas. He has grade profiles. He has a scanner, on which he listens to engineers and conductors talking to dispatchers. He generally knows

when he has time to move from one site to another. When he is beside a track and a train is coming, he often knows what train it is.

When he happened to be filming in Pennsylvania not long ago, I went out near Hershey to watch. Across twenty-four hours, he set up his tripod at ten places in seven communities, mainly in Myerstown, where, with a lumberyard's permission, he spent the night. He had awakened at 4 A.M. to drive down from New Hampshire, and now, in a typical working moment long after dark, Norfolk Southern No. 500 was approaching

12.
My childhood: closed to me. Or is it
under the mulch—fertile.

But very dark, very hidden.

13.
In the dark, my soul said
I am your soul.

No one can see me; only you—
only you can see me.

14.
And it said, you must trust me.

Meaning: if you move the harp,
you will bleed to death.

15.
Why can't I cry out?

I should be writing *my hand is bleeding*,
feeling pain and terror—what
I felt in the dream, as a casualty of war.

16.
It is coming back to me.

Pear tree. Apple tree.

I used to sit there
pulling arrows out of my heart.

17.
Then my soul appeared. It said
just as no one can see me, no one
can see the blood.

Also: no one can see the harp.

Then it said,
I can save you. Meaning
this is a test.

18.
Who is "you"? As in

"Are you tired of invisible pain?"

19.
Like a small bird sealed off from daylight:

that was my childhood.

20.
I was the man because I was taller.

But I wasn't tall—
didn't I ever look in a mirror?

21.
Silence in the nursery,
the consulting garden. Then:

What does the harp suggest?

22.
I know what you want—
you want Orpheus, you want death.

Orpheus who said "Help me find Eurydice."

Then the music began, the lament of the soul
watching the body vanish.

—Louise Glück

eastbound with "a hundred and fifteen
gons of coal." A hundred yards east of
Eisfeller, a horse-drawn Amish buggy
clattered across the tracks on Railroad
Street just before the gates went down.
Like a fisherman starting his outboard
motor, Eisfeller yanked a cord, turning
on his generator. Suddenly, three thou-
sand watts of halogen light sent a ball of
day across the tracks. Eisfeller ran to his
digital camcorder with dual mikes and
nineteen-power zoom.

Consider the engineer, approaching
this unexpected nova. Already, he was
pushing on his horn, the grade crossing

fewer than twenty seconds away. And
now his locomotive was about to go up
in a cloud of halogen light. Eisfeller
shined a flashlight on the camcorder by
way of explanation. "Let's face it," he
said. "I'm doing a weird thing out here."

He never acquaints railroads with his
plans or asks them for permission to do
what he does, preferring not to defy their
denials. He sometimes calls on local po-
lice and lets them know what he is up to.
He shoots from public parking lots and
state and municipal parks, as well as from
private land. Engineers now and again
report him to their dispatchers. On west-

ern trips, he has been confronted four
times by dicks of Union Pacific.

The air was shivering cold, but he was
wearing a cotton shirt and an open wind-
breaker, with no apparent interest in
its function. Bald, bluejeaned, wearing
white running shoes, he had a round
face, an amiable mustache, a significant
corporation. He drives everywhere, even
to Wyoming. With his theatrical lights,
his camcorder, and that hundred-and-
thirty-pound generator, he is not rich in
alternatives. His 1999 Windstar had a
hundred and sixty thousand miles on it,
a malfunctioning heater, and failed inte-

rior lighting. Camcording, he has stayed awake as long as three days and two nights. On interstates between filmings, he goes into rest stops and sleeps in the Windstar sitting up. "Td be a good case study in sleep deprivation," he told me. "I've had people knock on my car thinking I'm dead. One of the times when I was most dead was on the U.P. Triple-Track. I try not to push myself."

Gibbon was another kind of junction for me. Arriving there, CTSBT crossed the Platte River just about where—years earlier—I had collected a bagful of stream-rounded pebbles whose bedrock sources turned out to be in the Rocky Mountains, as much as five hundred miles from Gibbon. The pebbles set me off on a project in forensic geology, which led to Ronald Rawalt, a mineralogist and paleontologist who is also a special agent with the F.B.I. He met with me in Omaha and described some of the cases in which his geological sense of what came from

where had led him to the solution of heinous crimes, including the murder of a policeman in Pennsylvania and the murder of a D.E.A. agent in Mexico. Rawalt's home was, as it still is, in North Platte—the ne-plus-ultra railroad town, site of the largest railroad yard in the world—and Rawalt, unsurprisingly, knows almost as much about trains as he does about rocks. Now, long after I collected the pebbles, my base in Nebraska was in Rawalt's home.

I had tried for some time to find a way to travel in coal trains, but the quest had not gone well. After what seemed like fifty-five dozen unreturned messages, I made the breakthrough discovery that Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Union Pacific were not in competition with New Jersey Transit. I thought of Ron Rawalt, in North Platte, and sent him a note about the situation, saying, in effect, that I was in a kind of maze, walking back and forth, and getting no help from the hedge leaves. A few days later, Rawalt and I were in downtown North

Platte having breakfast with Scott Davis, Paul Fitzpatrick, and John Hasenauer, the local secretary-treasurer of the United Transportation Union.

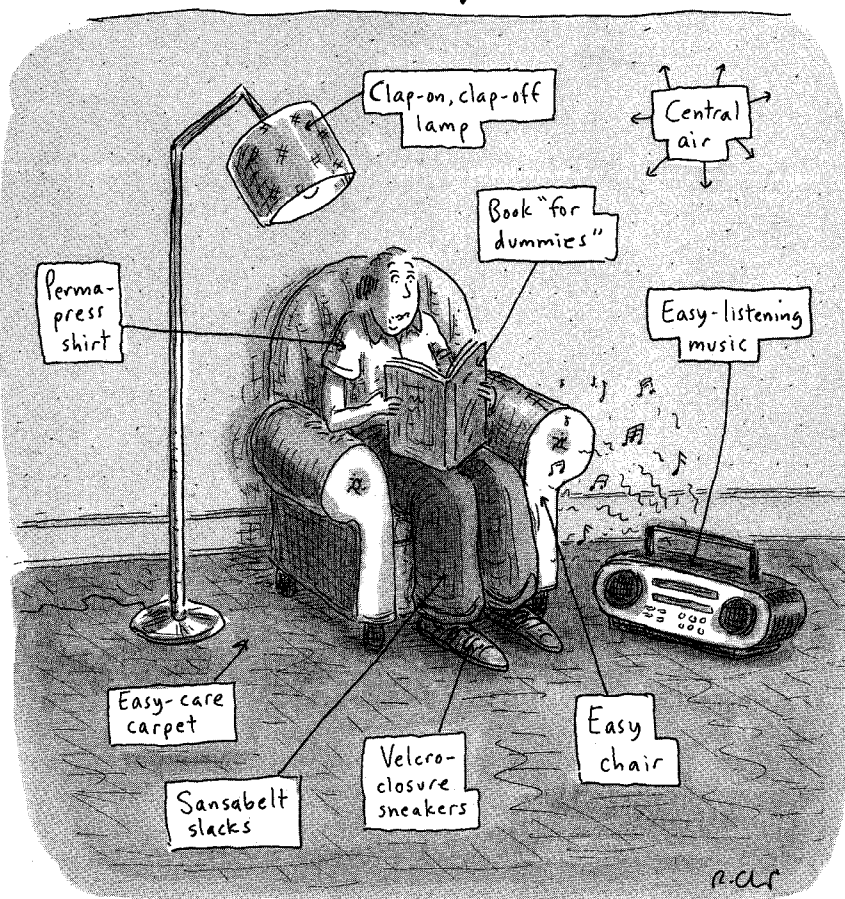
Rawalt's F.B.I. work rarely involves rail traffic, but instances have come up when he has had to stop trains. Near Scottsbluff once, he came upon a tractor-trailer stalled on a grade crossing with two coal trains approaching from opposite directions. The truck driver was desperately trying to pry open a signal box. Rawalt called Union Pacific's Harriman Dispatching Center, in Omaha, and Harriman stopped both trains. If this had occurred where cell phones were nonfunctional, Rawalt might have effected certain connections on his own that would "red-board the whole system," shutting down the Union Pacific for tens if not hundreds of miles. But a simpler way to stop a train, he said, is "to strap a torpedo to the ball of a rail." A torpedo is an explosive briquette.

Acting on a tipoff one morning, he drove down Route 30, the highway beside the Triple-Track Main, looking over a manifest train for signs of a "top-ten fugitive" who was a serial murderer known to ride freights. The engine number was the one he had been given. He saw a figure in a boxcar. He called the Harriman Dispatching Center and was advised that if he wanted the train to pull up right beside him the train would heed "emergency vehicle instructions." To wit: "Place a fireball on top of the car and stick your thumb down outside the window." A fireball is a red dome light. Rawalt had one and he turned it on. He stuck his hand out the window, thumb down. The train sounded suddenly like an orchestra warming up. Rawalt took the fugitive off the train. "He was armed with a knife, not a gun. He was not the fugitive murderer. But we ran him, and he was wanted out of Texas. There was a felony warrant for his arrest."

Felons are few among the transients on rolling trains, who travel from freight yard to freight yard, lily pad to lily pad. "They get off as the train slows down. Then they move to the other end of the yard. These guys carry schedules. There are more of them than there were in the nineteen-thirties."

Because of transients, freight cars that carry automobiles have become even more shuttered than freight cars that

The Easiest Life in the World



carry cattle and hogs. Railroads transfer two-thirds of new automobiles, and today's autorack cars appear to be made of steel venetian blinds. Somehow hoboes squeeze into them nonetheless. They like to ride the trains inside the automobiles. Each one has a couple of gallons of gas in it, because automobiles are driven on and off trains under their own power. Transients, settling in for a trip, turn on the automobiles' air-conditioners in summer, heaters in winter. When an automobile runs out of gas, the transient moves to another. If the railroad responds by removing the keys and shipping them in tamper-proof bundles, the hoboes respond by defecating and urinating in the automobiles, breaking windshields, and knifing upholstery. In winter, hoboes seeking warmth on coal trains bury themselves in coal.

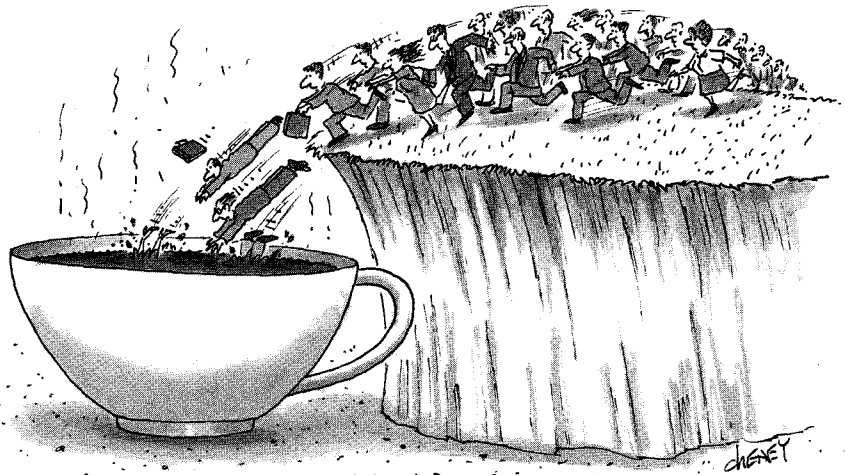
"But think of all the things you're not going to die of."

Railroad police are "commissioned," and they have arrest powers. When they are not busting autorack squatters, they are sometimes in pursuit of the people they describe as graffiti vandals, and whom others regard as Renaissance artists. The billowing cumulus of graffiti color reaches only partway up the sides of boxcars, hoppers, and gondolas, because that is as far as the artists effectively can reach. They are careful to mask out or otherwise avoid the reporting marks on the sides of freight cars (letters and numbers of identification), because they know that the reporting marks will quickly be restencilled if graffiti paint obscures them, and the art will not survive. They are proud of what they do. They stand admiring it as they are arrested. While I was in a rail-yard office one day, a company bulletin scrolled across a screen announcing that railroad police in Sacramento had at last arrested a graffiti vandal named Crooks.

Working cabooses do exist. If you set up a tent at Gibbon Junction and spend the summer, you might see one. Typically, they had a conductor, an assistant conductor, and several brakemen in them—the conductors handling paper waybills, the brakemen now and again walking beside the train to look for hot bearings or equipment that was dragging. The older cabooses were made of wood and had coal-burning stoves, which were wonderfully warm. Advanced technology came in the form of oil stoves, which were not wonderfully warm, and crews threw baggies full of diesel fuel into the burning oil, hastening the demise of the caboose. A pair of trains would give each other “roll bys”—crewmen in each caboose inspecting the other train. If a train had a problem, it stopped. Crewmen walked forward and fixed the problem. The engineer then pulled the caboose up to the crewmen. Now, in addition to Scott, the entire crew is Paul. If there is trouble, Paul walks back to it, and then back from it, as much as three miles, maybe in deep snow, while Scott waits, while stock-

William C. Vantuono, the editor of *Railway Age*, says that a unit train, such as a coal train, with no local switching work, could run without a conductor. So long, Paul. Scott becomes a crew of one, and even one-man crews may soon be a fading custom. In some rail yards, you find working locomotives with no one in them. Ron Rawalt casually predicts that "trains will before long be going coast to coast under remote control with no crewmen at all on board." Needless to say, these foreshadowings have not gone unnoticed by the United Transportation Union and the Brotherhood of Loco-

MONDAY



motive Engineers. Just step into a yard office among the gathered engineers and conductors and you will soon hear something like this: "Kids barely know how to throw a switch and pull a pin and make a train up, and they're running these R.C.L.s. We lost fifty engineers' jobs when they went to remote control. A guy with two years' experience is running remote control, replacing an engineer with twenty years' experience." Scott Davis, reviewing the subject, did not show much alarm. He said, "The railroad wants to go on one-man-only. They're not going to get that."

Meanwhile, the multiplication of coal trains and the accompanying rise of the intermodal stack train have brought congestion to the rail network and slowed down traffic in ways that robots might to some extent relieve. By federal law, train crews work a maximum of twelve hours. If their time runs out, they are "dead on the law," and they must absolutely stop the train and get off, the difference notwithstanding if they are out in the middle of the Great Salt Lake Desert or two miles from home. While more and more trains compete for track space, the crews' hours are a constant in equations full of variables. When time runs out and the result is a "dead train," trains behind it are affected, and trains behind them, until—as Dick Eisfeller once found—"U.P. eastbounds trying to get into Chicago are backed up half-

way across Iowa." He once referred to Burlington Northern Santa Fe as "the land of the standing coal train," and, employing a phrase of wide use in the industry, said of Union Pacific, "U.P. stands for Unlimited Parking. Parked trains are almost anywhere, waiting for new crews. The situation can go on for days or weeks." When train crews die, they are usually near a highway, and vans go out to get them. In Nebraska, they are picked up by armadillos. Armadillo Express is the name of an independent service company that has achieved prosperity picking crews off stranded trains. Nationwide, there are a dozen such companies. Not infrequently, they carry fresh crews as little as a mile from railroad yards to bring in dead trains. Those fresh crews are called dogcatchers.

The most hyperactive dogcatchers are in North Platte, because North Platte's Bailey Yard, at nearly three thousand acres, is not only the largest railroad yard in the world but also among the most crowded. Trains waiting for admission to Bailey die where they wait. When Paul and Scott pulled CTSBT into North Platte to tie up from their turn, eighteen miles of coal trains (twelve units) were already inside the yard, and half a dozen eastbounds were lined up waiting to come in. Crewless locomotives were rearranging autorack trains and varied blocks of man-

ifest trains. The wye was busy, and the balloon track—places where cars and locomotives are turned around. Two tank cars, poised on top of the East Hump, in silhouette looked like carpenter ants. Coyotes live in Bailey Yard. Wild geese overwinter at its water-table lakes. When you get down from your train, a van picks you up and drives you, say, two miles to the yard office, where your own car is waiting, sometimes covered with snow. Annually, about three hundred million gross tons of freight pass through Bailey Yard, where public grade crossings were eliminated years ago. Five streets of North Platte are on elevated causeways over the yard. Train watchers from many parts of the world make pilgrimages to the elevated causeways. If their skin is dark, they were obviously sent by Osama bin Laden. Informants call the F.B.I.

The main purpose of the yard is to classify freight cars in the way that UPS and FedEx sort packages in Louisville and Memphis. The robot locomotives shove manifest trains up small parabolic hills—the East Hump, the West Hump—where single cars or small groups of cars are set free at the summits to roll downhill into groupings of parallel tracks which are called bowls but in plan view resemble the strings of harps. The West Bowl has fifty tracks, the East Bowl sixty-four. Each gravity-powered "cut" of cars rolls into the bowl below and stops on a track where other cars with a similar destination are assembling as a new train. This may not represent a frontier of technology, but it is a distinct advance over "flat switching," the traditional technique of pulling the pin from a coupling, then shoving the whole train until it reaches a certain speed, then slamming on the brakes so that whatever has been uncoupled leaps free, rolls on overland, and is switched onto a designated track.

The yardmasters of Bailey work in glassy polygonal structures that look like airport control towers. Scott Davis took me into the West Hump Tower, where his yardmaster brother, Marty, was nearing the end of a shift. On the top deck, Marty sat alone in a very spacious room with a panoptic view, while two others worked in a similar space one flight down. Outside on the hump, a pinner was pulling pins and simultane-

ously operating, from an electronic device slung on his chest, the robot locomotive that was pushing trains up the hump. Inside the tower, one of the men on the lower floor sat before a computer screen and talked to the pinner through outdoor loudspeakers. On his screen, he could read the destinies of the cars on the hump, and he was telling the pinner where to pull pins to make cuts. As cars rolled off downhill, the computer was throwing switches all over the West Bowl, but if the computer were to overlook something it could be upstaged manually by the other man on the lower floor, who sat before a desklike surface covered with levers that operate switches. Marty Davis, yardmaster, alone on the floor above, seemed watchful, like a coach observing the calls of his offensive and defensive coordinators. At the shift change, Marty was replaced by Gib Larsen, who closely resembled King Lear. His hair was a sort of robe—a floor-length white robe. As we left the tower, Scott said, “He’s into mountain-man stuff. He has buckskin pants, buckskin shirts. He goes to Rendezvous days in Ogallala, where he throws axes.”

In the crew room in the yard office, computers were lined up as if it were a public library. Arriving for work, engineers and conductors log in for orders there; and after their turns they tie up on the computers before they go home. When Paul and Scott had picked up their printouts for CNAMR, the crew room was jammed with dogcatchers. Trains were dying left and right, in part as a result of the freezing weather. Mary Hanna and Carol Townsend were not there. They and two hundred and fifty men were the District 2 engineers. The district’s conductors were all men. There were not a few speckled beards, and mustaches large enough to resemble the lower halves of crossing signs. Most of the crewmen were clean-shaven guys in ball caps. Everyone wore hard-toed six-inch boots. While the crew room was actually a management-driven processing pen, it had the hubbub of a union hall.

As Scott’s and Paul’s time ticked, we waited three hours before we were driven to CNAMR, which was parked in a fuelling pit. What an ambitious word—“pit”—for a place to put something seventy-five hundred feet long.

There were loaded coal trains on either side of CNAMR. We climbed into the lead locomotive, and waited for the completion of air tests, fuelling, mechanical inspection. A hundred yards ahead were a blue flag and a device on the track that would derail the train if it were to move forward while the flag was present and authorization was not.

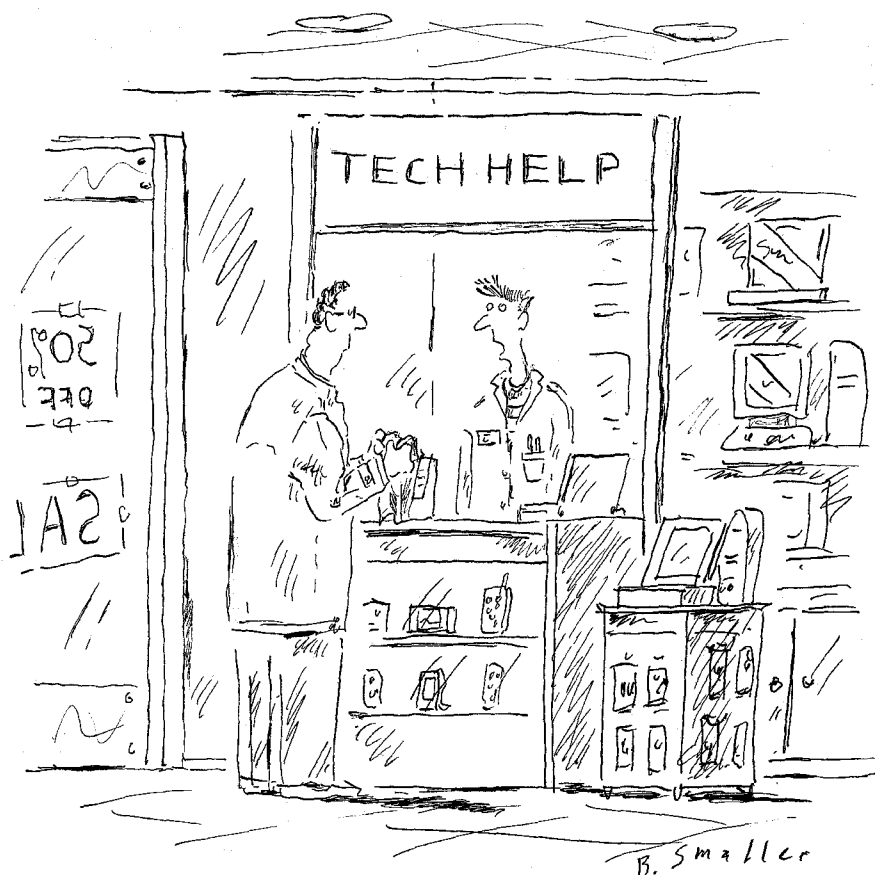
Finally, a radioed voice came into the cab: “Five-eight-six-four east to the east run. Through yardmaster. Over.”

Scott said, “Five-eight-six-four east out.”

He also said, “We got a lunar, Paul,” referring to a signal that at last had something positive to suggest. The releasing of the air brakes began at the two ends, and moved toward the middle. The train’s very long integral air tube was like the air sac of a rope fish. At 12:54 P.M., we were actually moving—five miles per hour—and Scott set the counter, saying, “So I’ll know I’m off that pit and can get up to yard speed.” He was up to twelve when a yellow light put him down. He set the dynamic brakes. Bumpily, the hoppers compressed. We stopped.

An hour later, we had not moved an additional inch. Beside us was a Z train—an intermodal meant for fast travel, but its status for the moment was no higher than it would have been had its name begun with C. Eventually, the towering double-stacked boxes stirred, and Paul said, “This shooter’s starting to pull.” In time, we followed the shooter, slowly, through the east end of the yard. Over a fence to our left was Central Nebraska Packing, where horses, until recently, were prepared for human consumption, and are now processed for zoos. Over a fence on our right, some healthy-looking palominos were grazing through snow, enchanted surely that a coal train lay between them and the house across the way. So far, it had not done us a lot of good to be drawn by thirteen thousand horses. An hour and a half after we began to move out of the fuel pit, we were still in Bailey Yard. But now we got a flashing green. We swung right over a movable-point frog and onto the Triple-Track Main. Scott said, “14:20. We’re out!” ♦

(This is the first part of a two-part article.)



“You fix it by buying a new one.”

FICTION

COMPANION

BY SANA KRASIKOV



Since she'd arrived in America and got divorced, Ilona Siegal had been set up three times. The first man was not an ordinary man but a Ph.D. from Moscow, the friend who'd arranged the date said. When Ilona opened her door, she'd found the Ph.D. standing on her front steps in a pair of paper-sheer yellow jogging shorts. He was thin, in the famished way of grazing animals and endurance athletes, with folds of skin around his kneecaps and wiry rabbit muscles braiding into his inner thighs. Under his arm he held what, in a moment of brief confusion, Ilona took for a wine bottle. But when he stepped inside she saw that it was only a litre of water he'd brought along for himself. Their plan had been to take a walk around a nearby park and then go out to lunch. But the Ph.D. had already been to the park. It wasn't anything special, he said. He'd just gone jogging there. He didn't like to miss his jogs, and since he'd driven an hour and a half out of his way to meet her he'd got in a run first. Ilona poured him a glass of grapefruit juice and listened to him talk about his work at Bell Labs. He reclined in his chair, his knees apart, unaware that one of his testicles was inching out of the inner lining of his shorts. Ilona stared at his face, trying not to look down.

The second man was American, somebody's co-worker, brought along to a party to meet her. He had graying red hair and his light lashes were coated with dandruff-like flakes. He took Ilona to an outdoor concert at the local community college. Afterward, she waited while he searched the cabinets of his kitchen, finally producing a tray of crackers and a dry triangle of Brie. All she remembered now of the man's small apartment was the blinding light of his empty refrigerator.

The last man was too young for her and obviously gay. He'd agreed to meet Ilona because he had the impression that she was an illegal who needed to marry to stay in the country. As soon as they sat down at an outdoor table at a café, the man told her that he wouldn't normally consider such an offer but his mother had fallen ill and he needed to pay for her treatment. Ilona nodded in sympathy and asked the young man to repeat himself more slowly. She understood that her case had been shoved so far into the recesses of her acquaintanceships that the people who now gave out her phone

number no longer knew who she was or what she wanted.

It had not always been this way. There had been happier times, when she'd had both a husband and a lover; when she and her husband had thrown parties in their Tbilisi apartment that went late into the night, with longer and longer rounds of toasts and the smell of sweat and sharp cologne overpowering even the odor of cigarettes. Nothing fed Ilona's spirits more than the company of men. She loved the sound of their hoarse voices, the amateur authority with which they spoke about world affairs and other matters they had absolutely no effect on. But most of all she loved the flattering light of their attention. After the last female guest had said good night, and she had found herself in the thrilling half-susceptible state of being the only woman at the party, was when modesty came most easily to her. It lent coherence to her whole character, so that she could finally be her most humorous and disarming self. But all that had been a world ago and she tried to think about it as little as possible, now that she came home to an apartment that was not hers, and to a man who was neither a spouse nor a lover but who seemed to demand more of her than either possibly could.

"Have you met Thomaz?" Taia said. "He's outside."

"The Georgian?" Ilona went to the sink to rinse off her hands. "I hope you didn't invite him here for me." Her fingers were grainy with the watermelon she'd been slicing. She ran them under the tap and felt around on the counter for her rings.

"I didn't invite him at all. He came with the Gureviches."

"He's a bit young, no?" Ilona slipped on the bigger of the three rings first, a teardrop diamond in a five-prong setting.

"If you're comparing him with your roommate," said Taia, who almost never referred to Earl by name. "Don't lose those." She glanced down at the rings. "One day you'll take one off and it'll fall down a drain. Some women don't even wear the jewelry they own. They have copies made."

"So maybe I should tear off a piece of tinfoil and wrap that around my finger instead?"

"Do what you want," Taia said.

There was no point, Ilona decided, in reminding Taia that before Felix started making money she'd been so cheap she'd gutted empty tubes of Crest, scraping the toothpaste from the creases. No matter how tough her life got, Ilona thought, she'd never lower herself to something so miserly. At least she made use of the nice things she owned. Unlike Taia, whose kitchen had floor-to-ceiling pantries, brushed stainless-steel *everything*, and polished granite counters that she touched only when she was throwing a party.

"Did you put new low lights in the ceiling?" Ilona said.

"It was Felix's idea," Taia said, tipping her head back. "He thought we'd get more for the house if the kitchen was brighter."

"You're selling it?"

"Not right away. It usually takes a year."

"You didn't tell me."

"We haven't really told anyone. Except the Kogans, and the Weinbergs, in case anyone knew of anyone who was looking. It isn't a secret."

There were plenty of things that Taia forgot to tell her—but selling a house? Was that just another bit of information exchanged between people with money, like a stock tip?

"Oh, don't be upset. A year's a long time. You can still come here whenever you need to get away from that man. Come this weekend. We're going to Providence for Parents' Day. You could drop in and water the plants, feed the cat." Taia laid down her paring knife and stood up. "Let me find you a key."

"I still have the key from last time," Ilona said. She couldn't tell if Taia was offering her a favor or asking for one, just as she couldn't judge if her friends kept things to themselves to protect her feelings or because they found her irrelevant. She knew they gossiped. A year ago, she used to bring up Earl in conversation all the time—told her friends stories about his two favorite activities, researching his genealogy and organizing his video collection; and mimicked him mercilessly even if he was in the next room, or precisely *because* he was in the next room and didn't understand a word of Russian. She was staying with him so she could save up for her own apartment. But lately she'd started to realize that unless she wanted to move north into Putnam County or south into

the Bronx, and either way end up an hour's drive from her job, her sojourn would have to drag on for at least another year.

She stepped outside and into the sun. The clouds were coasting slowly in the sky, forming metallic reflections in the second-story windows. The air was smoky from the grill. On the patio, two men were lamenting the loss of jobs to Bangalore. Ilona walked past the Kogans and the Ulitskys, past the women reclining in white lounge chairs. It was mid-September, but already she felt a kick of cold in the air. She wore a silk blouse, while the others had come in cotton sweaters. She set her cup on the refreshments table and bent down to refill it with seltzer. A few dead leaves had fallen on the grass. They were the weakest leaves, the lemon-lime color of early fall.

When she turned around she found Felix standing behind her. "Where is your friend today?" he said, and surveyed the people scattered around the lawn.

"When I left, he was still sleeping in front of his sixty-inch television."

"So Earl fell asleep and you snuck out?"

"Do I need Earl's permission to see my friends?"

"No. But I thought you'd extend the invitation to him."

"And what makes you think I didn't?"

"I don't think he would have missed an opportunity to be seen with you."

She was too tired to play this game today. Every time Felix tried to make her feel better he only made her feel worse. It was his diplomacy that was the worst of it, his awareness that every comment could be taken as a potential insult. The old contrite song, not for their affair of eleven years ago—which, thankfully, no one had learned about—but for all the other disappointments in her life.

"Earl couldn't come because he isn't feeling well. He's still weak from his bypass." It was a lie, an obvious one, because five months had passed since Earl's surgery. But who was going to argue? She picked up a plate. "I'm going to get something to eat."

"Please do." Felix stepped back a pace and returned her evasiveness with a delicate smile.

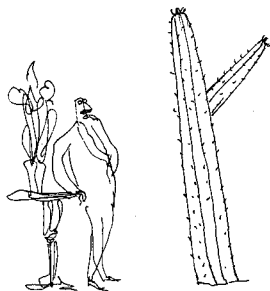
It was her fault for allowing Earl to meet her friends in the first place. She'd brought him along to the Fourth of July

party a year ago and introduced him to everyone as her "roommate." As though this would explain anything. He was seventy, she was forty-five. She may as well have called him her chef or her architect—it would have sounded more plausible. The minute she left him alone, he'd drifted off into an empty hallway. She'd discovered him an hour later in the foyer, talking to Felix about Hiroshima. Laughter from the party floated in from the yard while Earl went on about the Japanese who had jumped into the Motoyasu River only to be scalded alive by boiling water.

She felt her heels sinking into the lawn as she walked. Most of the other guests were wearing loafers or sneakers. A few had gathered around the grill to listen to the Georgian, the man Taia had mentioned. It was hard to tell if he was handsome or not; Ilona had seen him on the way into the party and had noted the light-gray eyes and crooked lower teeth, a combination that stirred an almost queasy sympathy in her. He looked younger than the men around him, possibly as young as thirty-five, yet he appeared to be on the brink of a decline that might be rapid, so that, when he finally did age, he would do so overnight.

"They told me they were guarding a base," the Georgian said, as the men parted to make room for Ilona. "They said that their friend had been shot in the hand and needed drugs to relieve the pain. I offered antibiotics, but they wanted morphine." She had no idea which war he was speaking of. It could have been Abkhazia or South Ossetia. She'd left Georgia three years before the republic had split from Russia, and its new problems—which autonomous province wanted independence next—had little impact on her. She'd heard of addicts in Tbilisi raiding hospitals even in peacetime. Perhaps it was the snobbery of distance: nothing would ever change there.

"I wanted to get out," he went on.



"But when I stood up one of them was pointing a rifle in my face."

"But you had a gun!" one of the men interrupted. "You should have shot him in the mouth!"

"Which mouth?" another said. "There were two of them!"

"I did something more dangerous than that," the Georgian continued. "I began to curse. I called them every name I could think of, hoping to alert someone who might overhear me. But I was running out of profanities."

He paused, glancing at Ilona. He looked surprised by the silent attention he had drawn.

"Aren't you going to tell us if you survived?" Ilona asked.

"Thank you," he said, nodding. "I did survive." He had a long jaw with a dimpled chin; it was the only feature that lent any merriment to his face. "I heard a vehicle drive into the hospital yard. The addicts thought it was a carload of soldiers. But it was only a man with an attack of pancreatitis."

"Pancreatitis? He must have been an alcoholic," Ilona said.

The Georgian acknowledged her mutely with his brows. He waited for the people around him to disperse into smaller groups. "He was. You work in an alcohol clinic?"

"No, a urologist's office. But I was a nurse in Tbilisi," she said.

"And what do you do now?"

"Catheters, rectal exams. Technically, I am only a receptionist, so I also pick up the phone. But that's the only *legal* thing I do."

"Then your work is closer to medicine than mine," he said. "During the day I lay carpet."

"And at night?"

"At night I clean supermarkets."

"Then I wish you luck finding something more suited to your skills."

The man's eyes flitted across her face, as if they couldn't decide which part to examine first. "That may be hard for me to do without a work permit. My visa expires in a month."

"And after that?"

He shrugged. "We'll see. I am Thomaz," he said, offering his hand.

She squeezed it lightly. "Ilona."

He held on to her fingers. "In my life I have met only two Ilonas, and both of you are very beautiful."

She felt heat rising in her face. So he is this kind of man, she thought. He was standing close, and she had to look up to speak to him. "You live in the city?" she said.

Thomaz aimed his dimpled chin at a heavyset man with a short, square beard. "Yosif is a cousin of my friend in Chiatura. He and his wife are letting me stay in their apartment in Brooklyn. Their son is at college and I'm taking his bed. It is awkward sometimes. I help buy food. If I have to use the bathroom at night, I tiptoe. But I'm not complaining." He touched his hand to his heart. "I am grateful. I feel as though I need to lose three limbs and an eye before I can be sorry for myself."

An illegal who cleaned supermarkets . . . She smiled to herself. This was all they could find for her? And yet she suspected he knew his appeal to women, and that in the worst of times he could still rely on it.

"It is a nice place here," he continued, looking around the property. Ilona followed his gaze down to the small rectangular pond. A dog was barking in a distant yard. "All this space," he said, shaking his head. "I am inside all the time now. It has been too long since I've seen woods, nature. The spirit starts to forget."

"This is hardly nature," she said. "But if you want to see nature you should come back and walk the trails. I could pick you up at the station. The trains run every hour." Her voice had slipped into the perfect fluency of half-truth. When was the last time she had gone hiking? The sun and the mosquitoes bothered her.

"You live nearby?" he said.

"Not far."

"In a house like this?"

"An apartment." He was staring at her fingers. "I share with a roommate," she added clumsily.

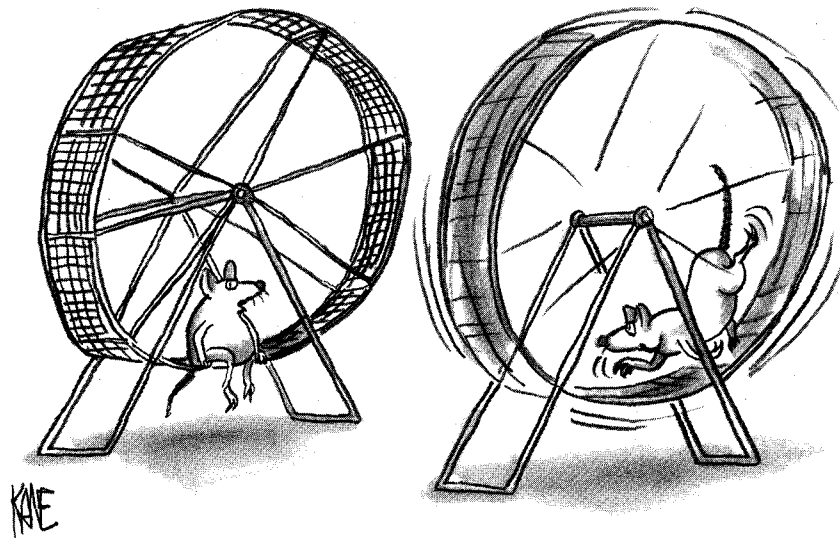
"You are not married, then?"

Ilona gave a bland, cheerful laugh. "Not anymore."

"Your rings. I didn't know . . ."

She straightened her fingers and examined her hand at a distance. "Some might say they are extravagant. But I invest in living."

"Who knows here?" He laughed. "There is a ring for everything. For



"I had an epiphany."

university, for fiancé, for boyfriend."

"Well, some of them *were* gifts," she said. "But not contractual ones."

By the time Ilona got home it was dark. The dog was at her feet as soon as she unlocked the door. "Quiet, Elsa," she whispered, and knelt down to let the dog lap at her palm. On its short dachshund legs it followed Ilona down the darkened hallway, where she slipped off her shoes and set them on a shoe rack next to Earl's. Heel to toe, their feet were practically the same size. It seemed perverse that, given all the things in the world they *didn't* have in common, shoe size would be something they shared. She walked barefoot across the carpet to where Earl lay dozing on the couch. A plaid throw hugged his hard ridge of stomach. The air was stale with the yeasty scent of bread. Earl had probably spent the afternoon grilling cheese sandwiches, buttering the pan to get a good, deep fry. Ilona leaned over the couch and tugged a creased newspaper out from under Earl's knees, then picked up his bottle of hypertension pills from the coffee table. A glass of water had left a bloated white stain on the wood. Ilona lifted it and rubbed at the polish, but that made it worse. She carried the pills and the glass into the kitchen, which was separated from the living room only by the switch from carpet to tile. "Like mopping up a child's ass," she said to the dog, which waddled in after her.

The room she slept in had once been

Earl's office. He'd cleared it out for her when she moved in, and now tall file cabinets and a gray plastic computer desk occupied one side of the living room. She'd asked him to get rid of them, but he said he needed to have all his old files available in case someone from the insurance office called. Six years the man had been retired.

Ilona rolled up her sleeves and lowered her hands into the sink. Earl was muttering something in his sleep and turning over on his side. A growth of silver stubble had sprouted on his cheeks. He barked a cough and opened his eyes. "What time is it, Luna?" he said, slowly rotating himself into a sitting position. He squinted at the clock on the VCR. "Seven-thirty? That can't be right." He found his glasses, adjusted the pads, and pressed them to his nose. He had a thick nose, German and retroussé, the kind glasses easily slid off.

"You told me you were coming home at six. Didn't we have plans tonight, Luna?"

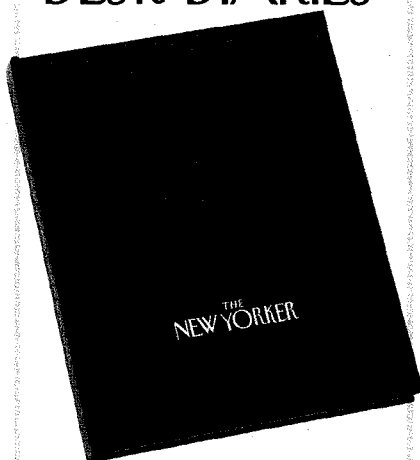
"Did we?"

"It's *Saturday*, Luna. I had to call Delmonico's twice so they'd hold our table."

She ignored him and continued rinsing. When had going to Delmonico's become one of her duties? Now that the maître d' greeted them as Mr. and Mrs. Brauer, Earl didn't like to miss a Saturday night. She dumped out a teacup and began to untwine the wet string from the handle.

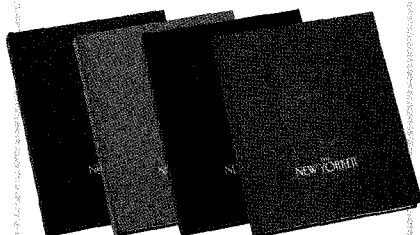
"It's a good thing I called," he said, and raised his heavy body off the couch.

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Ilona tossed the tea bag into the trash. "Call or don't call. They *always* say they'll hold our table, Earl. Because there's nothing *to* hold. Every time we go to that restaurant, it's half empty."

"You don't like Delmonico's now?"

"I don't care, Earl." She rinsed a plate and crammed it into the drying rack. "Does it matter what restaurant we go to this week? Can I just finish these dishes?"

His lower lip hung open as he searched for a thought.

"Earl."

"What?" He looked up, a white hair from his brow drooping into his eye.

"We have to trim your eyebrows."

His eyes scrolled up. He licked his thumb, then smoothed it over each brow. When he finished, he took a few silent steps toward his room. Ilona waited until he had closed the door, then wiped her hands on a hanging apron and went into her room.

She could hear him moving around on the other side of the wall. She knelt down beside the old-fashioned trunk that doubled as her night table. There was barely enough room in the tiny closet for all of her things. On good days, she tried to imagine that the office she lived in was a cabin on a ship and that she was in the middle of a journey across the Atlantic of another century. Kneeling, she removed the densely packed sweaters and beaded scarves one by one until she found a flesh-pink cashmere sweater. It was finely combed and as thin as lambskin; she had thought about saving it for a more interesting occasion. But now she bit through the plastic line of the tag and snapped it off. There would be other items for other occasions. She allowed her new clothes periods of latency that could last weeks or even months. This way, when she finally did take off the tags it was with the satisfaction of unsealing a ripe bottle of brandy. And if some people thought she was extravagant she was only preparing herself for a future that was far more uncertain than theirs. Would Earl ever have knocked on her door if she had looked any different? Would he have asked her to join him for a neighborly cup of coffee the very week she'd decided to move out of her apartment, three doors down? Would he have given her the sewing machine she'd admired? Or a fur coat two weeks later? And while she'd had to decline the fur (it

smelled like naphthalene and had obviously belonged to his dead wife), she'd got something better. Very politely, she had told him that she had no room for it now, because she was planning to move out of the neighborhood. It had become too expensive for her to live here—with her credit-card debts, car payments, and the money she'd paid in advance for nursing classes she discovered she had no time to attend. She spoke undramatically, but, like the best actresses, she had an instinct for timing. "But Mrs. Siegal," Earl had said, "a woman like you should never have to worry about money." And that was when he'd offered her his old office. She could stay as long as she needed to, as long as it took her to get her finances in order. That had been a year and a half ago.

She could hear Earl padding around the hallway now. She pulled off her shirt and slipped on the sweater. Her eyes looked tired in the mirror. Her hair seemed a shade closer to purple than to the burgundy she'd dyed it two weeks ago. She pulled it up from the nape of her neck and fixed it with a large lacquered pin. *Right this way, Mr. Brauer, Mrs. Brauer.* That's how the waiters would greet them at Delmonico's. Did she really look old enough to pass for his wife? Or were they playing the game, too? Well, it didn't matter to her what these people believed, whether they thought she was his wife or his girlfriend or his mistress. She was happy to cooperate with whatever public fantasy he had planned. Earl was outside the door, knocking.

"I'll be a second!" Ilona called.

What was she supposed to tell people—that even if Earl *did* want to he had his hypertension and his arrhythmia to worry about? Not to mention his prostate surgery four years earlier. For all she knew he was impotent, and it was more of a relief to him than a disappointment if she rebuffed his attentions.

He knocked again.

"Yes!" she said, opening the door.

Earl's striped shirt was buttoned almost to his chin. He stood in the doorway wearing his slacks and slippers. In his hand was a pair of manicure scissors.

"Let's do this quickly," Ilona said.

She let him watch her while she unfolded a sheet of newspaper in the bathroom sink. "Lean over, Aristotle Onassis." Earl closed his eyes and tipped his face toward the mirror. "Here's our friend," she

said, finding the errant hair and snipping it. She trimmed the rest, and then with the back of her hand brushed the clippings from his moist face onto the newspaper. When he opened his eyes again, he stood up straight. "Luna, you're my angel," he said, meeting her reflected eyes.

Delmonico's always made Ilona think of a hotel restaurant. The trellis-patterned carpet, the mirrored walls, the sense that its patrons were dining there only because they were too tired to search for something more interesting. But it was expensive, and for this reason Earl always seemed to enjoy it. She watched him hitch up his sleeves and open the leather-bound menu. He took to the business of ordering with an almost proprietary seriousness.

"You can't fool me," she said, smiling. "I know you're looking at the calf's liver."

"Nah, I wasn't, angel."

"Look at this, the steak comes with bacon. How can we keep coming here after what your doctor said?"

"I've been good, Luna."

"You've been good? Is that why the apartment smelled like grilled cheese when I came in?"

"I made those for Lawrence. He came by today with Lucinda."

"Your son just dropped in?"

"They asked where you were. I said you were visiting your friends. Nothing wrong with that."

Ilona stared at him. "Is something *supposed* to be wrong with it?"

"You know, they always have their own ideas."

Ilona folded her menu and placed it to the side of her plate. "What ideas?"

"They worry, you know. After the surgery. They think I ought to get an aide, just someone to come and check on me once in a while."

It was possible that he was making it up, she thought, as revenge for her not having taken him to the party.

"They think a professional can take better care of you than me?"

Earl didn't lift his head. "I told them I was fine."

"It's strange the idea didn't cross their minds when you had pneumonia and I took a week off work." She sipped her glass of water.

"I told them it was silly. I'm fine. I don't need anyone."

She could see that he regretted telling her. He'd started sweating, and she felt sorry for him. Ilona took a deep breath and slid her hand across the tablecloth to pet his. "I'll always take the best care of you," she said. They sat like that until the waiter approached. Ilona looked up at the young man and smiled. "I will have the tagliatelle pasta," she told him.

"And sir?"

"He will have fish," she answered.

Thomaz was arriving on the six-twenty. She left the clinic at five-forty and drove straight to the train station. By the time she joined the snaking line of cars at the platform, her windshield was speckled with rain. She gazed at the children twisting in the back seat of the car ahead, bouncing and looking out the windows every few minutes for the silver flash of train. Finally, it came, with a high squealing of brakes, and Ilona watched the crowd disappear under the covered stairwell and spill out again on the rain-slicked street. When she saw Thomaz, her stomach tightened. He was standing on the sidewalk, shielding his head with his hand. He wore an orange-and-coffee Windbreaker that was too large for him. Her guess was that he'd picked it out of a charity bin. He spotted her car, and she had no choice but to lift her fingers in a weak wave before she reached over to unlock the passenger door.

He got in and laid his wet backpack on his lap, then pressed his head against the window and looked at the sky, which had dimmed to a bruised purple.

"I'm sorry," she said, turning on the radio. "I should have checked the weather."

"Maybe it will stop in an hour," he said optimistically.

But it didn't. It continued as they drove down the parkway, the heavy drops pounding the windshield and the radio bridging the silence between them. It continued as Ilona steered the car up Taia and Felix's narrow driveway, paved now with fallen leaves.

They ran inside the house and took off their shoes and turned on the heat. Ilona told Thomaz to make himself comfortable on the leather couch, while she disappeared into the kitchen and fed the cat its supper from a tin can. When she returned to the living room, he was

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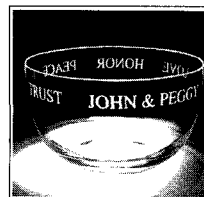
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holding a small parcel wrapped in coarse tissue paper. “A souvenir from Tbilisi,” he said, handing it to her. “It’s only silver, but I thought you might like it.”

It was a bracelet: stones set in twisted wire like flower petals. She molded it around her wrist and leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Thank you,” she said, and went back into the kitchen to make tea. It was half past seven, and Earl was probably waiting for her. She thought of taking the walk she had promised Thomaz once the rain stopped. But it was too dark now, and already she knew that she would not be driving him back to the station tonight.

She heard the TV in the background when Earl picked up.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“I’m watching ‘Schindler’s List.’”

“Can you lower the volume?”

The background voices died down. “I got the movie because you wanted to see it.”

“I’m staying at Taia’s tonight. Did you eat dinner?”

“Yeah, I made some canned beans.”

“I left you real food in the refrigerator.”

“I looked. Couldn’t find anything.”

“Earl, I left you chicken. And the steamed vegetables are in the glass container.”

“I ate those yesterday.”

“I made them for *both* days.”

“You didn’t tell me anything about it.” The TV voices got louder again.

She listened silently for a moment,

until she could hear his strained breathing.

“Are you still there?” she asked.

“Where am I going?”

“Did you take your pills?”

“I took them. They never do anything.”

He was just being difficult now. “What is it, Earl?”

He coughed into the phone. “I’ve got chest pressure.”

“Is it in your chest or your upper abdomen?”

“I don’t know. Just . . . general.”

“It’s very different.”

He didn’t answer.

“It could be the beans,” she said. “I promised Taia, but do you want me to come home?”

“No.” It was a halfhearted reply. “Maybe I’ll call Lawrence.”

“Lawrence? If you *aren’t* sick . . .” She stopped herself. “I’ll come home if you want,” she said again.

“I’ll be fine.”

The teakettle whistled.

“I’ll call you later,” she said, hanging up. She found a dish towel and poured the boiling water into two porcelain cups on a carved metal tray that she’d taken from one of Taia’s display shelves. She carried it into the living room, where Thomaz had stood up. He was running his fingers over the leaded glass of a Deco lamp. “It must be nice to live in a home like this,” he said.

Ilna set down the tray. “I don’t envy anyone.”



“Honey! I’m home!”

It was hard to tell if he was smiling or sneering. His face seemed to say, "Yes, this is also an answer, but not to the question I asked."

She had imagined she'd take great pleasure in showing off Taia's house. And she was happy that he seemed impressed, as much by the high sloping ceiling as by the heavy art books in the built-in bookcases, and even the bird's nest retrieved from the back yard, which spoke to a kind of collecting pleasure that transcended mere attainment. She wanted him to feel the character behind these things. And yet it was not *her* character, and she had to repress the urge to say that she might have done the room differently, that she would have placed the furniture closer to the windows or painted the walls a brighter color, a color she could wrap herself in. Thomaz circled the couch and lowered himself into the overstuffed armchair.

"I look around here and everything is clean, nice," he said. "People work, they do well."

She knelt on the rug by the glass table and dipped a tea bag into her cup. "Not everyone. Some people fold, they lose themselves here."

Thomaz watched her. "Like your husband?"

"Maybe if he had got an earlier start, but . . ." She shrugged.

"But?"

"To make it here, you have to *want* to be here."

"I see. He did not want to come to America?"

"We had a good life in Tbilisi," she said, watching a ribbon of color spread in her cup. "Good job, good apartment."

"Then why did *you* leave?"

"Everybody was leaving, all our friends. I didn't want to be in the last wagon on the train."

How else would she explain it, she thought? Could she say that she had followed a man who was not her husband to America? A man whose wife was her closest friend and who had become involved with her only because he was leaving the country soon and thought that she would stay behind? Or that she'd stayed with her husband because she'd been too scared to make the long journey alone? She had been thirty-two then, and without children, not young, perhaps, but young enough for her choices to seem reversible.

"My husband was an administrator at an electronics institute," she said. "You know what that means: he knew how to tell a joke, how much to slip in someone's palm. He was a smart dog. He knew when to bark and when to lick. But none of that helped him here. He tried programming, like everyone else. But it only gave him ulcers."

Her husband's whole being had recoiled from survival the way a half-asleep person recoils from the light. She had felt responsible for a while, but then war, the upheavals of independence in Georgia, had absolved her. The friends who had stayed began to write letters full of horror stories: demonstrations stopped by troops armed with shovels and clubs, backed by tanks, spraying tear gas and chloropicrin in people's faces. Then the electronics institute had closed, bankrupt without the contracts that had come from Russia. The Russian families they knew were fleeing and settling in remote towns where the government in Moscow had given them asylum and a bit of land. Even if her husband had wanted to return, there would have been nothing to return to.

"He isn't doing badly now," she said to Thomaz. "He went to San Antonio to work at his cousin's furniture store."

Thomaz leaned over the table and picked up his teacup. "Your husband's weakness irritated you?" The question seemed aimed more at himself than at her.

She answered automatically, "No. We were not a good match from the beginning."

"When a man can't support his family . . ." He was leaning back in his chair, shaking his head. "In my town, the men are all dying younger. They have heart attacks, strokes. But really it is because they've lost their purpose."

Ilona looked up at him from the floor. "Have you?"

"No, because I am here." He sipped his tea and set the cup down. "When I returned from Abkhazia, I could find no work. Then a clinic gave me a job. But no one paid us, at least not with money. And now people don't go to doctors at all."

"What do they do?"

"They die at home."

Ilona rested her palm on his fingers. "I'm sorry," he said. "All these sad stories." He parted his lips to add something more, then shut them on his thought. She took

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USHERS ARE FREELY WEEPING.

his hand. The skin of his knuckles was as smooth and tough as a walnut shell. He interlaced his fingers with hers, and before she could feel her sweat or pulse he was lifting her up, as a person would pull someone out of water, until her body was again doing what it knew and sinking deeply into the saddle of his lap.

She allowed him to kiss first her hands and then her face. She kept her eyes closed while Thomaz kissed the line of her jaw and the curve of her neck. When his lips moved down, she pressed her face into his hair and inhaled the smell of the weather he had brought inside with him.

Upstairs, he was only a flicking shadow, the taut muscles of a back and the scratchiness of a cheek. He moved his weight over her with slow concentration, the two of them conscientious to avoid clumsiness, not testing each other, careful not to trample whatever small force they'd generated. Afterward, they lay together in silence. When the air became too warm, she asked Thomaz to open a window.

"Tell me something," she said when he returned to the crumpled bed. She rolled onto her stomach and ran her fingers over the straight ridges of his forehead and nose, down to the stubbled cleft of his chin.

"You were too young to have been a doctor during Abkhazia."

"I was twenty-five. I had finished medical school. I did not consider myself young. The soldiers were younger. Nobody taught them anything. They didn't even know how to part with the dead." He tugged a sheet over his shoulder, for the room had got cool. "One night, three boys brought in a fourth. I could see as soon as they carried him in that there was nothing left to do for him. They shouted at me to rescue him. One fired a bullet into the ceiling. I forced fluid into his body so his heart would have something to beat. I kept going in front of his friends. I pumped his chest, just for show. It was worse than anything I had done to a living person." He turned away from her toward the wall. His body was still stiff a few minutes later, and she knew he hadn't fallen asleep.

"Do you have children?" she asked, finally.

Thomaz rolled onto his back and breathed in the room's chill air. "I have a son. He will be twelve next month."

"And your wife . . ."

"He and my wife are with my mother in Chiatura. My parents have a house there. I will probably also stay there when I go back."

She found the crook of his arm and curled her head into it. "It's good to have a place to go back to," she said.

They awoke at noon, to the sun leaking through the blinds. On the way back to the station, she drove him through the well-laid-out neighborhoods of Tarrytown—down the tree-lined streets, through the park, and past the tennis courts that gleamed in the sun. "Maybe next time I can see your home?" he said as she pulled up to the station. She smiled and planted a dry kiss on his lips.

In a diner across the road, she drank a cup of coffee. She considered the menu and put it aside. The coffee was strong enough to quench her hunger, and soon she would return home to cook Earl's supper. She felt as if her body had taken a long, full breath. She'd forgotten the way sex could sweep the clutter from the mind, and now she wanted to sit and inhabit this emptiness awhile longer.

Elsa was yapping when Ilona opened the door. The air inside was cold, laced with the bitter scent of carbon, the smell of oil that had burned and then cooled.

"Earl?" she called into the living room. She walked into his bedroom and found the bed made. "Earl?" she called again, louder.

She'd left the heavy front door open and now someone was knocking scratchily on the screen door.

"Hello?" Ilona said, stepping halfway into the hall.

"Mr. Brauer?" It was the woman from next door. Her name might have been Martha, but Ilona had never asked.

"Do you need something?" Ilona looked the woman up and down. She was in a sweatshirt and her thighs bulged under black leggings.

"I just wanted to see if Mr. Brauer was back." The woman cocked her head for a better look inside.

"Back from?"

"I guess you weren't here this morning, then, when the ambulance came?"



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It was pretty early. Woke me up." The woman rested her eyes on Ilona's sweater, her handbag and shoes.

"He isn't back," Ilona answered. "Now, please excuse me. I was picking up a few things to take to the hospital for him."

"Weren't you just calling him," the woman asked.

"I was speaking to the dog," Ilona answered.

The receptionist at Phelps Memorial would tell her only that Earl had been taken to the cardiac ward at 9:30 A.M. Was she an immediate relative?

"No," Ilona said. "I am his . . ." She threw a glance down the hall and saw Lawrence stepping out of the large steel elevator with his wife, Lucinda. "Just a second," she said to the girl. She slipped her rings into her palm and dropped them into her purse. "I am his companion," she said, turning back.

"Companion," the receptionist repeated to herself and searched her monitor. Ilona stepped away from the desk and threw Lucinda a sympathetic smile that was ignored. When Lawrence looked at her, his face was reproachful, but not, thank God, pained with grief. If they still had energy left for civilized hostility, she thought, Earl was certainly all right.

"How is he?" she said, approaching.

"Fine," Lawrence said. "He's fine." He seemed disappointed not to be able to tell something worse.

The doctors had told them that it was an anxiety attack, but with a patient who'd already had one myocardial infarction they had to take all complaints seriously. They were still doing blood work, Lawrence said. They would finish the serial cardiograms this afternoon.

"In that case, I will stay with him today," she said.

Lawrence threw a glance at Lucinda. "We don't think that's a good idea," he said. Like his father, he was not tall. His hair curled in a single wave on top of his head. "He will be staying with us at our house for a day or two."

"He likes his apartment . . ." Ilona

stared at both of them, confused. "This is what he wants?"

"It doesn't matter what he wants," Lucinda said. "What matters is his health."

"We like you, Ilona," Lawrence said. "But wouldn't it be better for you to be in the company of a more . . . energetic person? My father is weak. He has his illusions. But they can damage him." He seemed to be memorizing his shoes. "You can stay at the apartment for a little while," he said.

She did not ask him how long "a little while" meant. Like anyone else, Lawrence would be gracious until the time came to be cruel. Back at the apartment, she set a frying pan on the stove and poured in some oil. Through the window she could see the trees turning dark under the softening evening sky. At her feet, Elsa nibbled a few squares of salami. Ilona cracked two eggs and whisked them, then poured the mixture into the pan and watched it spread on the surface of the oil. If she left, she would take the dog with her. Earl wouldn't challenge her on that. Her plans struck her with the kind of certainty that overtakes the mind after a day of hunger. She could fly to Alaska, where the men were as plentiful as salmon. Or she could rent a cheap basement apartment in Ossining and invite Thomaz for the weekend. She laughed at the thought of them, in a windowless white-painted brick basement, refusing to feel sorry for themselves be-

cause neither of them had lost three limbs or an eye. He believed that his hardships had galvanized him, but she knew that anyone could be fearless as long as there was no other option. In her case, it wouldn't be so easy. As soon as Earl walked in the door and saw her boxes spread out on the

floor, he would ask her where she thought she was going. He'd tell her to drop it all and offer to take her shopping, and if she resisted he'd beg her to stay. How good giving in would feel. Tomorrow, she would begin to pack. She tipped her omelette onto a thin dinner plate, chopped the chives on the cutting board, and sprinkled them over the top. A little garnish always made it taste better. ♦

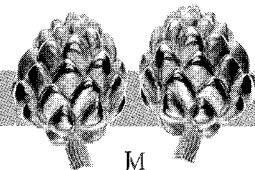


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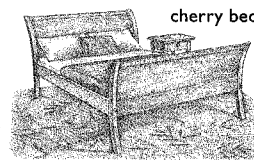


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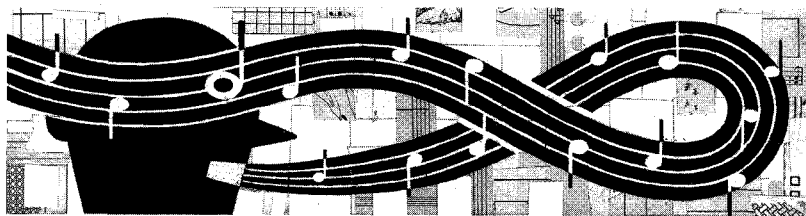
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MOON WALKER

How Neil Armstrong brought the space program down to earth.

BY THOMAS MALLON

"We've seen some kind of birth here," Eric Sevareid, the CBS commentator, declared right after Neil Armstrong took man's first walk on the moon, in July, 1969. To Sevareid, who always looked and tried to sound like a clean-shaven Elijah, the fuzzy, black-and-white television transmissions showed the astronaut as a "clumsy creature, half-blind, maneuvering with great awkwardness at first, and slowly learning to use its legs, until, in a rather short time it's running." Cosmically, we were off to the races.

Or so it seemed. Over the next three and a half years, after Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin's visit, another ten men walked the moon's surface, and that was it. NASA did not broadcast the departing utterance of Apollo 17's Eugene Cernan, the last ever made from the moon, but his words—"Let's get this mutha outta here"—now seem less canned than Armstrong's immortal banality about "one giant leap for mankind."

For all its technical brilliance, the unmanned American space program—its Voyagers, Galileo, and Hubble—has been a photo safari, merely a virtual triumph. Mars remains a red gleam in the eye of a species that can't quite bring itself to go there. The space shuttle, between catastrophes, travels its circles to nowhere. On the occasion of Discovery's relaunching this past July, MSNBC assured its viewers that "the journey continues." But there was no birth and, notwithstanding the occasional grandiose announcement by NASA, there has been no journey—un-

less you count how the American space program sure takes you back. The best things in James R. Hansen's new biography of Neil Armstrong, "First Man" (Simon & Schuster; \$30), are its antique touches: a reminder that the guidance computers of some nineteen-sixties spacecraft stored fewer bytes than a single early floppy disk; that Aldrin checked the progress of Armstrong's final piloting toward the lunar surface against the "figures written onto a stack of note cards that Buzz had placed between Neil and himself."

Those Americans with living memories of the moon landing—fewer than half of us—have a hard time summoning any recollection of Armstrong's face. In documentaries featuring the "summer of '69," the Manson murders and Woodstock typically get as much airtime as Apollo 11, and Manson remains a much greater visual presence in the pop-historical national consciousness. People knew little enough about Armstrong at the time—a short-haired dominating blandness seemed to go with the job—and saw almost nothing of him later. If they have any idea of his subsequent life, it's probably that he became a recluse.

Armstrong's boyhood was both peripatetic and confined. He moved sixteen times in fourteen years, but always within Ohio, until 1944, when his father, Stephen, a state auditor, settled the family in Wapakoneta, not far from the Wright brothers' Dayton. (In a rare poetic gesture, Armstrong decided to take with him to the moon two small pieces of the Wrights' 1903 Flyer.) Stephen Arm-

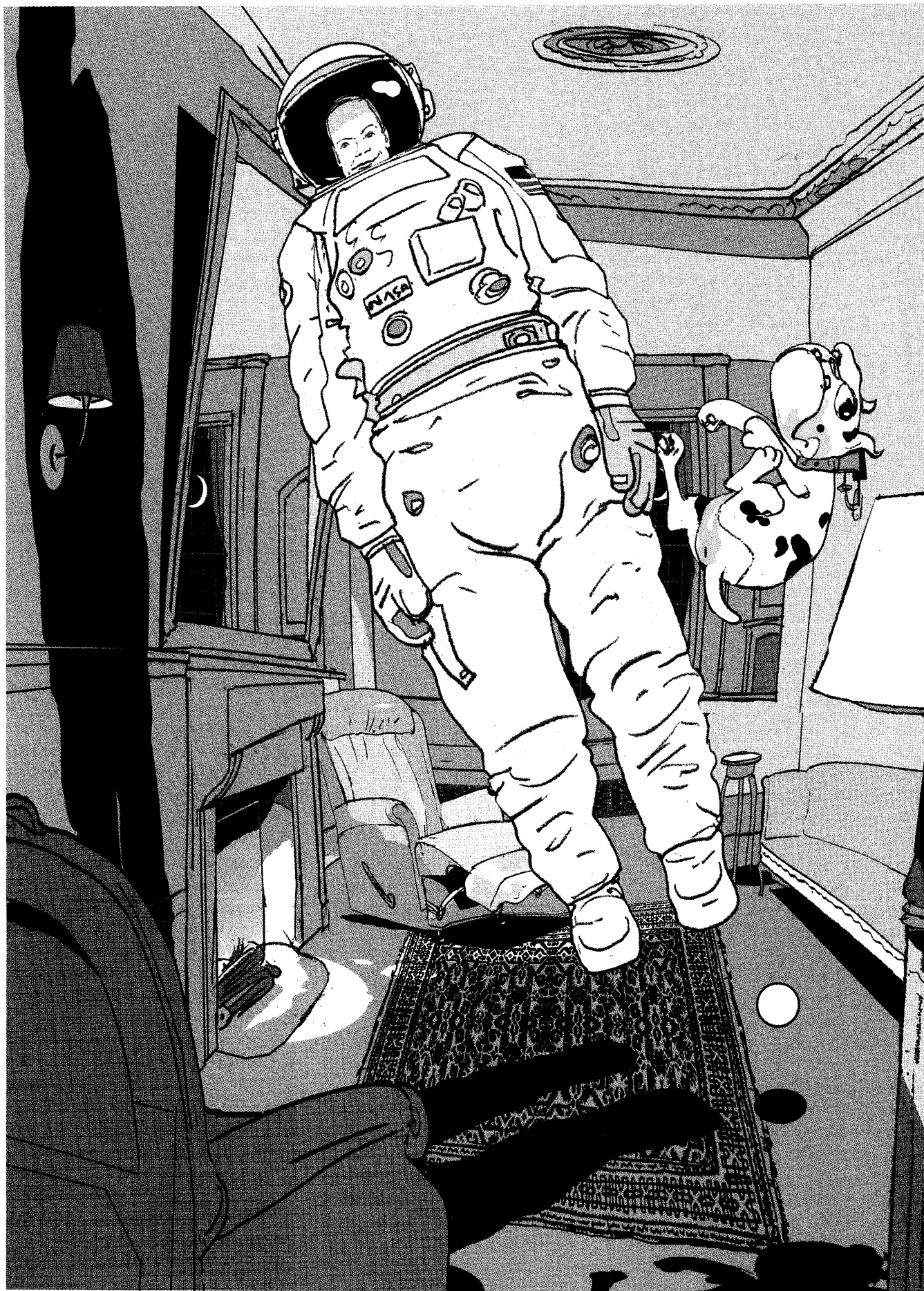
strong was more than usually stern, and his wife, Viola, more than ordinarily devoted to Jesus. Her son, who later called himself a deist, may have developed his lifetime's "conflict-avoidance strategy" when dodging her spiritual proddings. Viola's voice quavers with immanence whenever the biographer cues it. "A flood of tears gushed from my eyes," she recalls of the moment when her television announced Armstrong's selection to command Apollo 11. "There was a tumult within me. I sobbed in anguish. Soon I was on my knees in prayer."

Growing up, her son made regulation progress through public school and the ranks of the Boy Scouts; learning to fly a plane before he could legally drive was the closest he came to doing anything out of order. Before his twenty-second birthday, Armstrong had flown seventy-eight missions over Korea, escorting photo planes, bombing supply lines, and once ejecting into a rice paddy, after his low-flying Panther snagged a booby trap that the North Koreans had strung above a river valley. He returned home to Purdue University to complete an aeronautical-engineering degree that took him to Edwards Air Force Base for seven years of test-piloting. Over the California desert, he flew an ever more dartlike series of military aircraft, including the elegant black X-15, whose wings and needle nose took Americans to the edge of space before, in the early sixties, the quick-and-dirty ballistic approach of Project Mercury sent Shepard, Glenn, Carpenter, and the rest of the Original Seven astronauts aloft, one by one, on the tip of a missile.

Even after Armstrong became, in 1962, one of the New Nine astronauts who followed the Original Seven, he saw himself not against some limitless azure sky but over a table of blueprints: "What I attended to was the progressive development of flight machinery. My exploration came totally as a by-product of that. I flew to the Moon not so much to go there but as part of developing the systems that would allow it to happen." His life was about means, not ends.

Armstrong spent his first astronautical years—riding simulators, spinning in the g-force-inducing centrifuge, shaking contractors' hands—on Project Gemini, the program between Mercury and Apollo that tested the mechanics of

ISTAN BANYAI



"How long must it take before I cease to be known as a spaceman?" Armstrong asked a reporter seven years after coming home.

"rendezvous and docking," essential maneuvers for a moon mission that would involve detaching a tiny "lunar module" from a larger spacecraft already in lunar orbit. The L.M. was designed to drop to the surface and, hours or days later, spring back up to rejoin the mother ship.

The Lunar-Orbit Rendezvous option had been selected because of its relative cheapness and, it was hoped, Soviet-beating speed of development. The method's drawback, as Hansen notes, was the "specter of dead astronauts sailing around the Moon" in the event of mission failure; Earth-Orbit Rendezvous, which was more expensive, would allow for their retrieval if not their rescue.

Either way, it was in Earth orbit that rendezvous and docking first had to be tested, and Armstrong's Gemini 8 mission, flown in March, 1966, with the astronaut David Scott, brought him closer to death than his bailout over Korea had. Armstrong and Scott were to chase and capture an unmanned rocket called the Agena, whose teasing mouth and general unpredictability worried astronauts. As things turned out after docking, it was a stuck thruster on the Gemini craft itself that sent Armstrong and Scott, as well as the attached Agena, tumbling end over end with such fierce, disorienting speed that the astronauts nearly lost consciousness. Armstrong managed to save himself and Scott, but not the rest of the mission, by shifting to the reentry-control system, which required the stabilized crew to come home immediately. There had been no failure of nerve or body; only the specs and the hardware had malfunctioned, a much worse contingency for the engineer-astronaut to contemplate. He was too depressed to enjoy the brass bands welcoming him home to Wapakoneta.

Back in Houston, there was a bit of rivalrous grumbling among some astronauts about what they called a timid performance, but Armstrong had the support of the cautious operational men on the ground. The averted disaster gave Chris Kraft, the chief of flight operations, only higher regard for Armstrong, and the methodical amiability that he managed to display on a subsequent good-will tour to South America—a studied, high-percentile performance in another sort of centrifuge—won over

WITH A TEN-FOOT POLE

The sky is white and nerveless and involves
 Standing off at a ludicrous distance, thinking
 Bad thoughts—well, not bad really, rather say
 Homeless, images of a time and place
 Long since scattered to dust—but still, what power!
 My dearest wish—but one shouldn't have wishes,
 Wishes are horses that kick you in the heart,
 Then ask you if you'd like another ride.
 I rode one once, or let's say she rode me—
 But you don't want to hear that story again.
 I know I don't. Maybe you'd like to hear
 About a time and place that kept their distance.
 The sky was white and nerveless . . . Leave it at that.

—Robert Mezey

George Low, an official at the Manned Spacecraft Center, who, three years later, helped select the Apollo 11 crew.

Armstrong's 1947 high-school yearbook photo was captioned "He thinks, he acts, tis done," a recognition of the seamless opacity that, two decades later, left Norman Mailer unable to decide whether Apollo 11's commander was "particularly innocent or subtly sinister." Mailer, the only important American writer aside from John Updike to find the lunar voyage worthy of sustained attention, thought that "tracer hints of every forest apprehension from the puma to the deer to the miseries of the hyena seemed to stalk at the edge of that small-town clearing [Armstrong] had cut into his psyche so that he might offer the world a person." After Gemini 8, other astronauts began calling him the "ice commander"; Michael Collins, the genial command-module pilot who flew Armstrong and Aldrin toward the moon and waited for them in lunar orbit, felt so frustrated by Armstrong's remoteness that he resorted to astrology for clues to his commander's character.

Hansen makes no comparable psychological effort. Throughout this predictably authorized biography, he accepts answers from his subject that any lawyer would strike as nonresponsive: "I've never been a blamer"; "I don't know myself whether it was really good or not. I wouldn't have done it, but I can't say that it was wrong to have done it." Armstrong's wife, Janet, had had difficulty

communicating with her husband since at least 1962, when he retreated into work and silence after the death, from a brain tumor, of their two-year-old daughter. After thirty-three years of marriage, late in 1989 she left a note on the kitchen table, "citing years of emotional distance," and divorced him.

Armstrong remains in another vexed marriage, the one history made for him and Buzz Aldrin, who followed him down the ladder of the L.M. and became, preposterously, a kind of also-ran. Aldrin had done an M.I.T. thesis involving orbital mechanics, but, in contrast to Armstrong, "Dr. Rendezvous," as he came to be known in the program, was pushy and visionary, possessed of a psyche that badly wanted out of its pocket protector. One can tell from Armstrong's interviews with Hansen—despite a rote assertion that he "didn't have any problem" with the pairing—that the commander of Apollo 11 would have preferred just about any other partner.

The two astronauts managed to "pat each other on the shoulder" when the L.M. touched down, but once they were outside Aldrin didn't take any real pictures of the mission's leader. The only decent still photograph of Armstrong on the moon was taken by Armstrong himself: he appears as a reflection in Aldrin's visor. Aldrin now apologizes for his neglect, but blames the distraction of a surprise phone call from Richard Nixon to the lunar surface. Asked to consider the matter, Collins says it "never entered my

mind that there was some nefarious plot on Buzz's part to exclude Neil from the photo-documentation of the first lunar landing. It just never occurred to me. Maybe it should have."

Aldrin had expected to be the first to step off—during the Gemini space walks, the commander stayed inside while the No. 2 went extravehicular—and he made clear his desire for the distinction, going so far as to lobby the other Apollo astronauts. His father, an impossible-to-please oil-company executive, also made a ham-fisted argument of his case to NASA officials. Was it Armstrong's seniority in the program that led to his being chosen instead? A preference by the space agency, amid the miasma of Vietnam, for a civilian rather than someone military (Aldrin was still an Air Force officer) to take the first step? Hansen says that NASA even "used the technicalities of hatch design and LM interior layout" to create the fiction that it was just plain *easier* for Armstrong to exit first. But the real reason, revealed only decades later by Chris Kraft, involved a perception of Armstrong's greater suitability for American legend: "Neil was Neil," Kraft explains. "Calm, quiet, and absolute confidence. We all knew that he was the Lindbergh type. He had no ego." Armstrong wouldn't discuss the matter with Aldrin, and Kraft got what he wanted.

The walls of the spidery L.M. were so delicate that Armstrong remembers how "one of us could have taken a pencil and jammed it through the side of the ship." In the last moments of descent, the astronaut, who had once concluded that the real glory days of piloting had ended with the First World War, needed to take over manually and steer the contraption of a ship away from some rocks "the size of Volkswagens" which had turned up at the planned landing site. He was guided down in part by the L.M.'s shadow, and even today the thrill of what he did can't be fully dulled by the dust of jargon that his memory kicks up: "I spent more time trying to arrest translational velocity than I thought would be necessary." The touchdown was so soft that for a moment both he and Aldrin weren't sure that they'd landed.

Armstrong felt pleased with the rocks he had gathered ("they produced an extraordinary proof of the constituency of the regolith"), and his temperament was

entirely comfortable with what geologists call the principle of least astonishment. As the astronaut describes it, "The scenario that was the least astonishing was the one you were supposed to accept as the basis for further analysis." When his lunar walk and collecting were done, Armstrong retired to the L.M. for the night. He was kept awake not by the thought that his morning departure from the moon depended on "a single, nonredundant engine," or by the realization that he had become the first human being to walk upon another world, but by the noise of a water pump inside the L.M. "The quality of sleep was poor," he reported.

So were the adulation and the afterlife, though Armstrong's post-flight public performance was what the NASA solecism calls "nominal"; Kraft had reason to be pleased. However joylessly the astronaut may have embarked on his world tour, he resisted sullenness even in New York City, where stacks of I.B.M. punch cards being thrown like ticker tape sometimes failed to flutter apart and dented the limos like bricks. After the Apollo 17 crew made a similar procession, Cernan noticed that "within two years of our trip, almost every president and dictator who hosted us was either assassinated, in exile or headed that way." One suspects that Armstrong would not have permitted himself such an observation, lest it interfere with some larger theory of least astonishment.

Armstrong did not become the isolate people believe he did. The plain sight he hid in was *so* plain it was hard to realize that he was often out and about. He briefly took a desk job at NASA, then for years taught engineering at the University of Cincinnati. He undertook a few "corporate involvements," making commercials for Chrysler and becoming a director of Thiokol—after he had served on the investigative commission that blamed that company's shoddy O-rings for the blowup of the Challenger. Hansen declares that, "with Neil's help, Thiokol managed not only to survive but also grow." Of these business years, Armstrong himself says little more than "I felt comfortable in the boardroom."

The only recorded hint of private-life

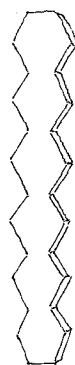
scandal is a rumored dalliance with the actress Connie Stevens after she and Armstrong made a U.S.O. tour of Vietnam—though Hansen assures readers that the only intimacy they shared was to "play cards to pass the time." In the early nineties, after Janet left him, he made an apparently happy second marriage to Carol Held Knight, a Cincinnati widow and businesswoman. Armstrong will allow whoever is President to summon him for whatever Apollo 11 anniversary is upon us, but he has stopped signing autographs and continues a mild tendency toward litigiousness, suing Hallmark for the unauthorized use of his likeness on a Christmas ornament, and threatening action against a barber for selling his hair.

The "high price of celebrity" was, according to Hansen, "an unwanted, unasked for, but inevitable, legacy" that the "lunar Lindbergh" shares with his famous predecessor. In Armstrong's case, the biographer mistakes annoyance for torment. He never paid a kidnapper's ransom and seems to have had no politics of any kind, let alone the destructive sort that Lindbergh acquired. "We were aware of the controversies" is Armstrong's comment on the nineteen-sixties as they were experienced outside the Manned Spacecraft Center.

Hansen's text, compulsively quantified and binging on acronyms, seems to have taken *Who's Who*, NASA performance reports, and *Time* style of the Luce era ("Wife Janet felt . . .") as its principal influences. The biographer's voice is so blandly in synch with his subject's that, without quotation marks and changes of pronoun, a reader would be hard put to tell where narrative leaves off and interview quotation begins. It isn't surprising that Hansen finds Armstrong's

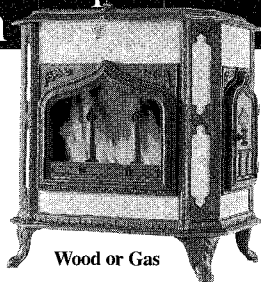
famous first words to be part of the "simple eloquence" and "extraordinarily judicious restraint of expression" that he perceives in his subject. But it's also no surprise to learn that Armstrong may have got his giant-leap imagery from a NASA memo that circulated shortly before Apollo 11's takeoff.

Hansen tries to supply occasional



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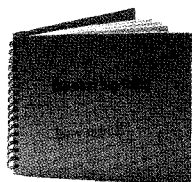


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color and oomph by musing on the workings of fate, as when Armstrong escapes with his life in Korea, "almost as if the young flyer was being safeguarded so as to become the grand prize of some extraordinary Destiny." When, in 1964, the Armstrongs' house is saved from fire with the help of their Houston neighbor Ed White—an astronaut who later died in the 1967 Apollo 1 ground fire—Irony is holding the hose.

Armstrong spends a large part of his interview time getting his authorized biographer to stamp out any bits of apocrypha that might inflame the literal with the legendary. Yes, he chatted with his Korean War bunkmates about the rocket science of Dr. Robert Goddard, but did he tell them that he hoped one day to be the first man on the moon? "I very much doubt I made the statement." Yes, he did take with him aboard Apollo 11 a tape of eerie electronic theremin music, but not, as *Life* reported, because his wife liked the record: "I included it because *Music Out of the Moon* seemed appropriate for the flight. I do not remember that it had anything to do with Janet." And, despite what Aldrin wrote in his autobiography, Armstrong did not say, "Isn't it fun?" during their early minutes on the moon. He said, "Isn't it *fine*," referring to the surface powder.

The United States had sent Mr. Gradgrind ("Facts, the one thing needful") to be the first extraterrestrial, and when he returned he avoided reporters' questions that he deemed to be of "just human interest." Of course, there was never much other interest, much other point, in going to the moon. Nor will there be in a still unlikely voyage to Mars. The manned space program, fuelled by superpower pride and competition, was a human indulgence, and, insofar as it continues to exist, should be sold to us not for its supposed "spin-offs" and indirect benefits, and not for its scientific yields (machines do, in fact, do the science better), but for its feel-good hubris and its conquering heroism. If Hansen wants a symbolic irony, he should find one in Armstrong's long-ago docking mishap with the Agena; perhaps all the tumbling portended the bashful looping of the shuttle, its endless circumscription of the stay-at-home species that keeps launching it.

It would be churlish to blame Armstrong—this brave, talented man who briefly took us out of here—for the long failure that followed. But a small piece of the fault does lie with him for being faithless to his own election. The manned space program might have had a better chance of firing a second stage if an approachable hero had returned to us as the First Man. Post facto, Gordon Cooper, one of the Original Seven, suggested John Glenn as an alternative. Mailer would have chosen Collins, so quotable and "so obviously at ease with a martini." Still others would have picked Jim Lovell, whose sunny and dependable personality made Tom Hanks even better casting than Hollywood knew.

Did anyone have the right to be so little changed by the voyage as Armstrong seems to have been? "How long must it take before I cease to be known as a spaceman?" he asked a reporter seven years after coming home. Aldrin, having exposed his own vanities to the lunar night, succumbed to alcoholism and had a breakdown once he got back; James Irwin (Apollo 15) and Charles Duke (Apollo 16) took a religious turn; Cernan says he "spent years searching for the Next Big Thing" and never finding it. Armstrong seems to be more like the geology he brought home. "Well over 90 percent of the samples," Hansen tells us, "have been placed untouched in archival reserve."

The original L.M., detached from the command module that returned Apollo 11's crew to Earth, drifted around the moon for some years in a decaying orbit before smashing into the surface. Viola Armstrong, the astronaut's mother, died in May, 1990, having just told her daughter, suddenly, "I am not sure there really is a God. But I am very happy that I believed." Anyone who long ago displaced a portion of his spiritual yearning into Armstrong's voyage knows today that the journey came to nothing, or at least to nowhere. Even so, even now, one remains grateful to have lived through the false dawn. ♦

FAUX PAS OF THE WEEK

From the *Dallas Morning News*.

In Wednesday's Metro section, Norma Adams-Wade's column incorrectly called Mary Ann Thompson-Frenk a socialist. She is a socialite.

CONNECTIONS

Race and relations in Zadie Smith's new novel.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Zadie Smith's first novel, "White Teeth," published in 2000, when she was twenty-four, was a big hit—a prize-winner, a best-seller. Some people claimed that this had less to do with the book than with Smith's "demographic": that, as a mixed-race writer (Jamaican mother, English father) who was also young, female, and good-looking, she made perfect jacket copy, perfect book-tour material. That wasn't fair. The novel may have been loved for non-literary reasons, but they went beyond Smith's excellent cheekbones. Set in northwest London, in the black, white, and South Asian neighborhood where Smith was raised, "White Teeth" hinges on the friendship of a white, working-class Englishman, Archie, and a Bangladeshi man, Samad. Archie is married to a black Jamaican woman; their daughter gets pregnant by one of Samad's Bengali sons, and it goes on from there—four-hundred-plus pages of racial devil-may-care. This, actually, is not altogether unrepresentative of modern London, but, as Smith herself has acknowledged, "White Teeth" is utopian in its treatment of race, and some readers, I believe, cherished it precisely for that. The book is ecstatically inclusive—Smith seemed to omit no incident, no character, no metaphor, no joke that struck her fancy—and in that come-all context the combining of races seemed right, not just for this novel but for the world. Maybe, people thought, postcolonial Europe was going to be O.K. after all.

Eventually, however, Smith decided that "White Teeth" was too inclusive. She described it as "a fat, messy kid who needs help." Not surprisingly, then, her next novel, "The Autograph Man" (2002), was tighter. This book, too, was emphatically multicultural. Its hero, an English autograph dealer, is half-Chinese, and a Jew; his best friend and his girlfriend, also English, are black Jews. But, as these pedigrees suggest, the book is self-aware. It is also rather cold.

Its main subject is celebrity, a matter that, after the fevered publicity campaign surrounding "White Teeth," may have been on Smith's mind. But, like celebrity, the critique of celebrity is not a heartwarming business. In chastening herself, Smith seemed to cramp her spirit.

Now we have Smith's third novel, "On Beauty." Thesis, antithesis, synthe-

the other.) As a corollary, race is at last presented as a tortured subject. It creates *difference*, a challenge to any general conception of beauty or goodness.

Again, the hinge is a racial cross: the marriage of Kiki Belsey, a black woman from Florida, and Howard Belsey, a white Englishman who is a professor of art history at a New England college. Soon after the book opens, the Belseys' thirty-year union is in trouble. Howard has had an affair, and, to Kiki, this is not just a marital insult but a racial one. "I gave up *my life* for you," she says to him—by which she means her life as a black person. A hospital administrator, a Maya Angelou reader, a believer in astrology, Kiki, for Howard's sake, has spent her entire adulthood among white academ-



In this book, Smith looks closely at intra-racial tensions.

sis? Yes, sort of. "On Beauty" is less expansive than "White Teeth," but more exalted than "The Autograph Man"—or "White Teeth." The subject is humanism, the relationship between beauty and goodness. (The title is taken from Elaine Scarry's manifesto "On Beauty and Being Just," which argues that the one leads to

ics, listening to them say things that she didn't agree with. Now he has repaid her by having a fling with a white colleague?

Meanwhile, the Belseys' three children are living out the consequences of being mixed-race. Jerome, the eldest, a student at Brown, has strayed from his family's liberal politics. He is working as

an intern for Monty Kipps, a conservative black scholar—a wearer of three-piece suits, a campaigner against affirmative action. But Kipps is not just an ideological enemy; he is Howard Belsey's personal enemy. Howard, a convinced postmodernist, is writing a book on Rembrandt whose aim is to show that the Dutch master's vaunted humanism is just a cover for the enactment of power relations. He shows his students a Rembrandt nude and asks them to see it as "inscribed in the idea of a specifically gendered, class debasement." (Among other things, "On Beauty" is a satire on American universities. Smith recently spent a year as a fellow at Harvard, and she seems to have got a bellyful.) Kipps, for his part, has written a highly praised book reaffirming Rembrandt's humanism. Jerome thinks the world of him, and doesn't see why being black, or half-black, should cause anyone to oppose the social order. He likes the social order.

That's one mixed-race scenario. The Belseys' daughter, Zora, also a college student, shows us another. Zora is determined to enter the white world, and to find a place of power within it. Nevertheless, she falls in love with a black "spoken word" artist from the ghetto. Then, there's Levi, sixteen years old and desperate to reclaim his black roots. Levi wears a do-rag; only under duress does he detach the iPod earphones that, day and night, pipe rap music into his head. His one goal in life is to be "street." All week he waits for Saturday, when, without his parents' knowledge, he sells pirated DVDs on the sidewalks of Boston with a group of Haitian immigrants.

These different post-integration dramas give Smith the chance to address something she has not looked at closely before: *intra*-racial tensions. When Levi joins the Haitians, he is dispatched to a street corner with a skinny, tight-lipped man named Chouchou. Levi regards Chouchou with awe: "Down his right arm there was this knockout scar, rose-pink against his black skin, beginning in a point and then spreading out down his forearm like the wake of a ship." Levi knows no French, and Chouchou's name (which, ironically, means "dear") is a mystery to him:

"That's your name?" asked Levi, as they crossed the street. "Like a *train*?"
 "What does this mean?"

"You know, like a *train*, like choo choo! Train coming through! Like a *train*."

"It's Haitian. C-H-O-U-C—"

"Yeah, yeah—I see . . ." Levi considered the problem. "Well, I can't call you that, man. How about just Choo—that works, actually. It works. Levi and Choo."

"It's not my name."

"No, I get that, man—but it just runs better to my ear—Choo. Levi and Choo. You hear that?"

No answer came.

"Yeah, it's street. Choo . . . *The Choo*. That's cool. Put it there—no, not there—like this. *That's* the way."

"Let's get on with it, shall we?" said Choo, freeing his hand from Levi's and looking both ways down the street.

This is subtle and poignant: a big, innocent, high-fiving boy, who has never missed a meal in his life, versus a man who is looking for his dinner money and whose "knockout scar" probably means to him things that the boy hasn't dreamed of.

Behind this plot about race relations, however, there is another plot going on. In her acknowledgments, Smith says, "It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E. M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted." The first line of Forster's "Howards End" is "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister." The first line of "On Beauty" is "One may as well begin with Jerome's e-mails to his father." In Smith's book, as in Forster's, a child of the "good" family (Jerome) falls in love with a member of the enemy family (Kipps's daughter); an emissary (Howard) goes off to put an end to this, and only makes things worse; the mother of the enemy family (Kipps's wife), before dying, wills something valuable to the matriarch of the good family (Kiki), whereupon the enemy family ignores the bequest. On and on go the echoes, down to tiny details: a special concert, a special tree, a special shopping trip.

This use of "Howards End," though it is an exemplary postmodern "appropriation," doesn't do the sort of subversive work that we expect from that maneuver. On the contrary, it underlines the new book's humanistic message, pulling Forster in to say, Yes, Zadie Smith is right, all human beings are connected and they are all in a muddle, which they must solve with love, more than with justice. But doesn't the shadow presence of "Howards End" also

distort the plot of "On Beauty," bending it to extraneous purposes?

It should, but the fact is that Smith's plots have always been a shambles. She is a novelist of ideas, and that concern, not realism, is what drives her stories. In a recent interview, Smith invoked Lionel Trilling, another novelist of ideas, who claimed that plot was essentially a laboratory. The novelist, like the scientist, sets up special conditions. What if we fed these mice only cupcakes? What if we married this traditional Southern black woman to a white British intellectual? That way we can get information about glucose metabolism, information about race, that wouldn't come clear under random circumstances.

The problem with this, for the novelist, is that the reader may rebel against the contrivance of the experimental situation. The marriage of Kiki and Howard is hard to accept. How could these two people, who seem to have almost nothing in common, have got together, and stayed together for thirty years? Every time they speak to each other, they seem to be speaking to someone else, across the room.

The situation is worse than that, though. Kiki is the moral center of the novel, a woman full of warm, ancient, instinctual wisdom. ("Her gut had its own way of going about things"—the good way, always.) In other words, she is a black stereotype. Smith clearly knew she had a problem with Kiki, for, while she made her virtuous, she also made her enormously fat, and in case you are thinking that this might be another aspect of that woman's admirable earthiness, forget it. Obesity is a sort of obsession in Smith's novels. Sometimes it seems that ten pages don't pass without some poor fat person coming down the sidewalk, to her acidulous notice. Kiki outdoes all her predecessors; she weighs two hundred and fifty pounds. In a culminating episode, when she has sex with her husband on the living-room floor, Howard addresses himself to her "cataclysmic breasts," with their "silver-dollar-sized nipples, from which occasional hairs sprouted." Soon those breasts are bouncing and sweating. The scene is reminiscent of Gulliver's being clasped to the bosoms of the Brobdingnagian women; it is horrifying. In other words, Smith, deep down, is not sure she likes her black

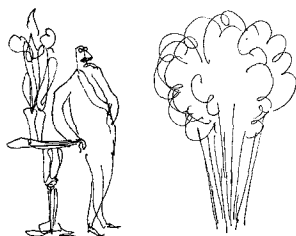
icon. On the other hand, Howard, whom we're supposed to disapprove of—time and again, we're told that he's selfish, and divorced from his feelings (he is Smith's counterpart to Forster's Henry Wilcox, the character whose chastisement will be the book's primary lesson in humanism)—makes sense to us in a way that Kiki doesn't. His jokes are funny; he's fond of his children; he may not talk about his feelings, but he has them. Howard's end is honorable, but the plot that gets him there is highly artificial.

But, while the plot is a wreck, many of the episodes it engenders are not. They do what the realistic novel is supposed to do—hold up a mirror to its time. I have quoted only one good scene, but there are a lot more, on marriage and adultery, parents and children, professors and students. What interest me most, however, are the scenes about race, and, Kiki aside, the extent to which Smith has made them rich and complicated. Race has never been just race; it has always involved class as well, and history. But rarely have I seen a novelist explore that intersection—showing how the race-class nexus affects who says what to whom at a party, who wants to go to bed with whom, who pays a call on whom, and brings a pie—more energetically than Smith. This is not an untilled field. Indeed, it is a whole department of the modern English-language novel: the postcolonial department, which was born before Smith was. But she is especially well positioned for this project, not merely by being mixed-race but by being young, and thus having grown up—unthinking at first, taking what she saw just as life—in the ethnic stew that came together only in the past few decades. This means that she can talk about that world without self-consciousness and without fear of seeming racist. Such license may be an extraliterary virtue, but, when it comes to novels about race, I'll take my virtues where I can get them. Smith, with her predecessors, could help do for blacks what Saul Bellow, fifty years ago, did for Jews; that is, make them normal subjects for the novel, no longer people who have a sign over their heads saying "Jew" or "Black" but regular people, with the same privilege of texture—of self-contradiction and error, and thus of tragic force—as white people. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

The City of Falling Angels, by John Berendt (Penguin Press; \$25.95). In his first book since the success of "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil," more than a decade ago, Berendt follows the same formula: he explores a mysterious, derelict city (this time, Venice), ingratiates himself with its leading eccentrics, and tells their stories. Berendt has a talent for letting characters sketch themselves. This book is less sensational than its predecessor, and the whodunit at the center, the burning of the opera house La Fenice, is really far less interesting than the smaller machinations and intrigues that Berendt finds along the way. The seduction and swindling of Olga Rudge, Ezra Pound's mistress, by the director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, is enthralling; whether an electrician intentionally left a blowtorch burning is not. Berendt is happiest among the city's witty sophisticates and latter-day Milly Theales, and though his story forces him to include a few ordinary Venetians, he does so, it seems, reluctantly.

The Pitcher Shower, by Donald Harington (Toby Press; \$22.95). In thirteen novels, Harington has created his own loopy Yoknapatawpha County in the fictional Ozark hamlet of Stay More. The hero of this installment, Landon (Hoppy) Boyd—the nickname is a nod to Hop-along Cassidy—travels from one rural town to another, showing movies to farm families who pay a dime or a dozen eggs for the privilege. Harington's stock-in-trade is a kind of fringe hayseed; he's Faulkner crossed with Tom Robbins (almost every female in the novel verges on nymphomania). His stories are best when they just jiggle along. When he tries to stop and infuse them with meaning ("It was starting to get dark, and the dark helped his illusions"), they falter.



Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground, by Robert D. Kaplan (Random House; \$27.95). America bears the burdens of a civilizing empire, like it or not, Kaplan argues in this tour of elite Special Forces and Marine outposts in remote and hostile places. The invariably buff, commonsensical soldiers he encounters hold forth in a stirring vernacular of acronym-laced profanity, and, together, constitute an admirable portrait of America's volunteer, working-class warrior caste. Yet their stories compete with Kaplan's attempts to romanticize the Bush Administration's claims on global power. "As I traveled from continent to continent," he writes, "my most recurring image would be one that Remington himself might have painted: singular individuals fronting dangerous and stupendous landscapes." The troubled military missions that Kaplan observes in Colombia, the Philippines, Djibouti, Afghanistan, and Iraq hardly seem the stuff of manifest destiny. An alternative to Kaplan's view is offered by a National Guardsman he encounters in Afghanistan: "We're like tourists with guns."

Mark Twain, by Ron Powers (Free Press; \$35). There have been more than forty Twain biographies in all and at least three in the past five years. Ron Powers's six-hundred-page account avoids psychologizing and, instead, places the author in the context of American life at the turn of the last century. For Powers, Twain was America's first "rock star," a global celebrity whose titanic personality embodied the best and worst traits of America during the Gilded Age (which he named). Twain exhibited industriousness, avarice, irreverence, and courage, as well as a genius for literary innovation. He contributed to the mythology of the West (with "Roughing It"), invented the satiric travelogue (with "The Innocents Abroad") and the Washington novel (with "The Gilded Age"), and elevated American vernacular speech to the level of art.

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THE THEATRE

MOTHER LOVE

"Medea," and the Wooster Group on its artistic inheritance.

BY HILTON ALS

If Medea were tried on Court TV today, would we forgive her? Would the psychiatrists and feminists called to the stand in her defense try to justify her crime—the murder of her two young sons—by attributing it to postpartum depression or to the “oppression” of her callous and unavailable husband? We’ve met a few Medeas in recent years, at least in the news: Susan Smith, Andrea Yates, Marybeth Tinning—three women found guilty of killing their own children. And each has had a “reason” for her behavior: a violent boyfriend, depression, hysteria, so-called weird feelings. By murdering their progeny, these mothers, in a sense, murdered themselves. But perhaps the most disturbing aspect of infanticide, besides the actual death of the child, is the way the act tears apart our sentimental view of motherhood.

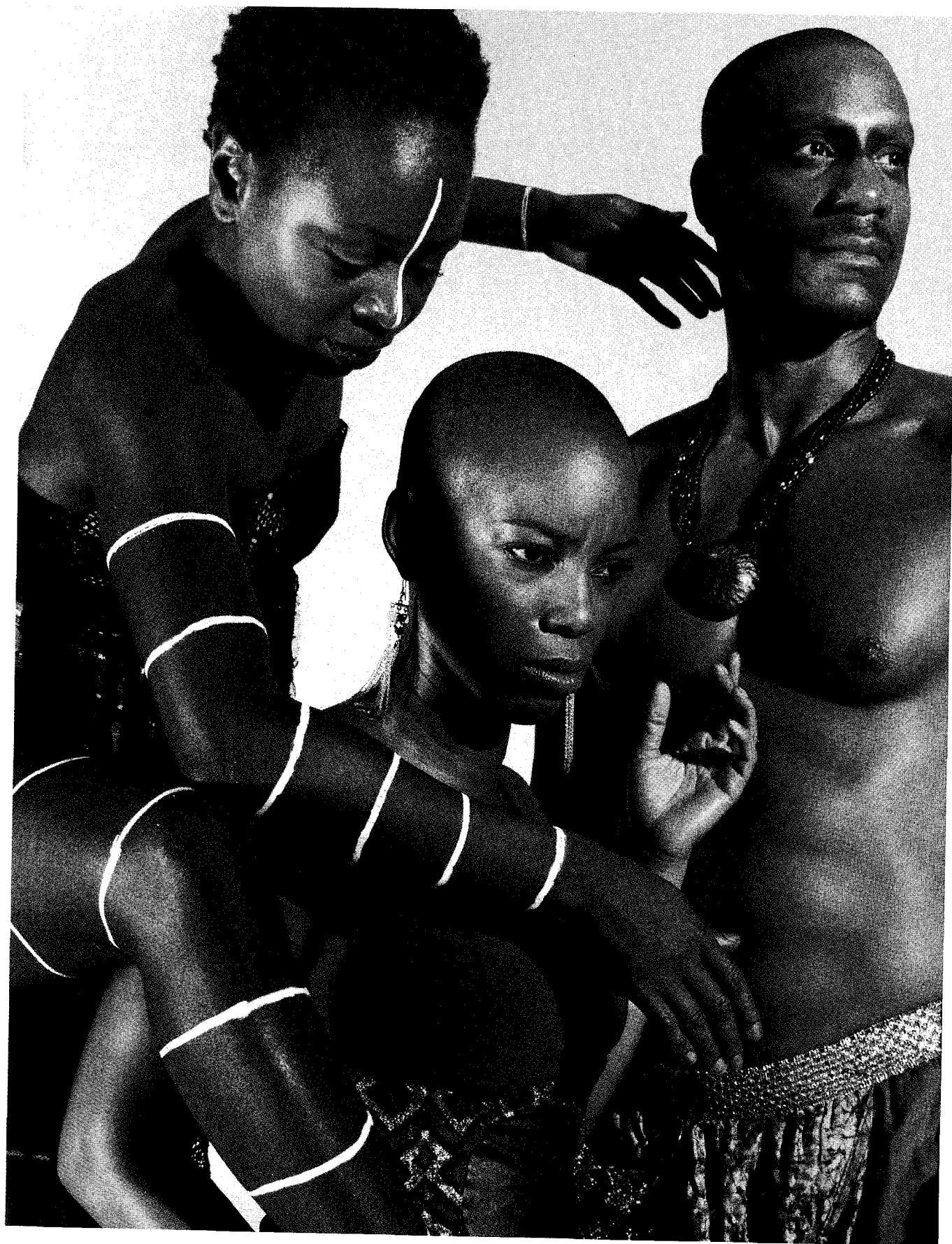
As much a social responsibility as an emotional one, motherhood is synonymous with safety, order, and the keeping of secrets: we tell our mothers who we are long before we tell the world. But what if your mother has no desire to listen? What if her interests supersede the concerns of the tiny life that is counting on her to negotiate the universe? Part of what makes Euripides’ “Medea” (which has been adapted and staged by Alfred Preisser, the artistic director and co-founder of the Classical Theatre of Harlem, at the Harlem School of the Arts) such a complex and enduring work is its subtext: Medea’s rage may stem, in part, from the fact that she has been forced to grow up. Becoming a mother has not dulled her desire to be an adored little girl herself, rewarded for her cleverness with the place of honor in Daddy’s lap. Medea, as played here by April Yvette Thompson, is a familiar type—the woman who claims to be staying in an abusive marriage because her children need a father. Actually, what such a mother needs—what Medea needs—is a father to love

her. Her children are secondary to that.

Before following Jason to Corinth, where Euripides’ drama is set, Medea did many things for her lover. She disabled the dragon that kept watch over the Golden Fleece. And, as she explains here, “I willingly deceived my father. Left my home; / With you I came to Iolcus by Mount Pelion, / Showing much love and little wisdom. There I put / King Pelias to the most horrible of deaths / By his own daughters’ hands, and ruined his whole house.” Now Medea lives for the moral superiority that comes from having sacrificed everything for her love, never understanding that the reason she committed such valiant and heinous acts was in order to turn Jason into the kind of strong man she had always dreamed of possessing, and whose importance would be reflected onto her. In that regard, Euripides—like Flaubert and Proust—shows that romantic love almost never has anything to do with the beloved’s objective worthiness. Jason is simply a vessel for Medea’s fierce longings. In a sense, she doesn’t know him at all.

In Corinth, Jason (Lawrence Winslow) wants to put the past behind him. To curry political favor—for himself and for his family—he leaves Medea for Princess Glauke, King Kreon’s daughter. Kreon is aged and wise and unsentimental, at least as the great Earle Hyman plays him here. But Medea’s anger at being abandoned by Jason finds a target in Kreon’s rule, and eventually he decides that her desire for spectacle is too much: he orders her to leave Corinth, whose calm and stability are hard-won.

What recourse is left to Medea? Vengeance against this society of men that will not make her its First Lady. She will rob Jason of his fatherhood, leaving him without a legacy, as he has left her without an identity. Thompson’s Medea wears a red dress—the color of the blood that she has spilled

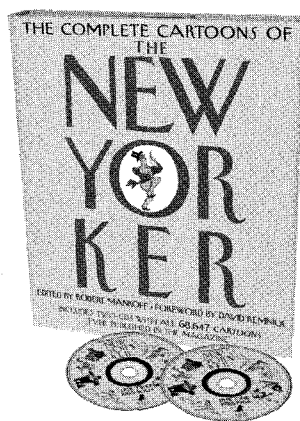


Death (Zainab Jah) visits Medea (Thompson) and Jason (Winslow), at the Classical Theater of Harlem. Photograph by Cass Bird.

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and will spill, the color of the poisoned blood that courses through her own veins. The childishly petulant Medea cannot, despite Jason's pleas, be reasonable. Winslow makes it clear to the audience why Jason has left her. His large, sculpted, grounded presence gives way before her steady stream of invective. Winslow's Jason wants to be practical and socially responsible, an adult; he lives in a cloud of self-justification, with the confidence that comes from being unconditionally desired.

Preisner plays well with all of these undercurrents. He has staged the work with brio: on the stripped-down metal stage, the actors are used to great visual effect, circling one another in beautifully executed costumes (by Kimberly Glennon) that function like distress signals from passing ships. Instead of keeping the chorus together, Preisner has the five-woman group dance around the stage, hissing and crying, like a physical manifestation of Medea's suffering. And he has hired a gifted supporting cast. Nevertheless, at times his direction feels confused and slight. His adaptation of "Medea"—which has been cut down to seventy intermissionless minutes—seems undeveloped. The show has been reduced to a kind of tragic vaudeville, Medea and Jason as Punch and Judy. Instead of getting to the dark heart of the tragedy, which is the tragedy of anyone who refuses to know himself while severely judging others, Preisner worries too much about preserving the play's classicism, which he demonstrates in the usual ways: through his actors' over-enunciated dialogue and self-consciously noble bearing. He would have done better if he had turned "Medea" into a contemporary spectacle, showing us a closeup of his heroine testifying in her own defense.

Is there nothing the Wooster Group cannot imagine—or reimagine? In recent years, Racine, Chekhov, O'Neill, and Miller, a series of dead white males embalmed by academia, have had their most sacred and studied texts turned by the Group's director, Elizabeth LeCompte, into rigorous, primal messes that have shifted our perception of what constitutes a well-made play—indeed, what constitutes theatre. In a Wooster Group show, the audience is as much

drawn to an actor speaking his lines expressionlessly into a microphone as it is to a video screen showing clips from "Godzilla." Everything is up for grabs, because everything exists to be seen.

In its current production, "Poor Theater" (at the Performing Garage), the Wooster Group has created its most self-referential work to date. The show—or, rather, the experience—is performed by four veteran members of the Group, Kate Valk, Ari Fliakos, Sheena See, and Scott Shepherd, and is divided into three parts, each dedicated to a special influence: the late, hugely influential director Jerzy Grotowski, the avant-garde choreographer William Forsythe, and the artist Max Ernst. The first part recounts the story of a Group visit to Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre, in Poland, a couple of years back. There the performers studied—with the help of a guide (played by the imaginative Valk, who assumes a number of roles here)—Grotowski's method for creating what he called a "poor theatre," a theatre that lacks the "rich theatre's" costuming, artifice, and "hybrid-spectacles." In the "poor theatre," the actor uses only his own instrument—himself—to tear down the wall between audience and performer, thereby revealing both, more viscerally, to themselves.

Onstage, the Group's performers employ documentary-film techniques—"We arrived in Poland. This is what happened to us"—before spinning more obliquely into what the material means to them. The Group can only hope to approximate the Laboratory's initial brilliance; failure is built into the enterprise, making the effort something of a tender joke. The Wooster performers are clumsy fans: ardent but awkward in their imitation of "greatness." In the second part, Valk, Fliakos, and See—all astonishing in their dedication and their sense of play—try to reproduce Forsythe's "contact choreography," while Forsythe (Shepherd) explains to the audience that only skilled, trained dancers (which the Group actors are not) can perform his techniques. As the dancers spin, collide, and fall, it becomes clear that if "Poor Theater" is about anything, it is about love—the love of performance—and about having the courage to make a fool of yourself while declaring it. ♦

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HUNTING DICKENS

Roman Polanski's "Oliver Twist."

BY ANTHONY LANE

One afternoon near the end of Charles Dickens's life, his son Charley was sitting in the library at home when he heard a commotion. Alarmed by the screams, he hurried out expecting to find a fight, only to discover his father, hard at work. The work in question was the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes, in "Oliver Twist," and Dickens, playing every part, was shaping the scene for public declamation. The plan was to read it, to a paying audience, on a tour of the country. In the event, it became his party piece, and on February 15, 1870, his pulse, taken before and after the performance, showed a rise from 90 to 124. In the western town of Clifton, Nancy's murder caused "a contagion of fainting," with "a dozen to twenty ladies borne out stiff and rigid." The great Victorian actor William Macready attended one show and pronounced it equal to "two Macbeths." After one nightly killing, Dickens confessed, he walked the streets with "a vague sensation of being 'wanted.'"

That is the kind of immersion—the plunging of body and soul, like a blade, into the meat of the matter—that we crave from Dickens, that we both dread and treasure in "Oliver Twist," and that we expect from any film of the book. To demand loyalty to every fibre of the plot would be absurd; if any novel is rich and robust enough to be knocked about, it is this one. All we ask is that the treatment be full-blooded, as with the gothic, oddly Germanic terror instilled by David Lean in his 1948 version or the unembarrassed jollity, spiced with weeping, that Lionel Bart and Carol Reed brewed for the 1968 musical "Oliver!"

And so to the latest "Oliver Twist." This was written by Ronald Harwood and directed by Roman Polanski, the duo who brought forth "The Pianist" (2002). Harwood's filleting of the text (any adapter must be a master butcher, especially with Dickens on the slab) is nothing if not neat. We start with Oliver

(Barney Clark) being led by the beadle, Mr. Bumble (Jeremy Swift), to the workhouse, where he is selected, by the famished boys, to ask for more. The sequence is so familiar that it has the quality of myth, rather than fiction, as if history were dotted with recurring Oliveres. From here he goes to Mr. Sowerberry (Michael Heath), the undertaker,

tacting Mr. Brownlow, and her conscience is both the making and the death of her. Sikes and Fagin are harried by the mob—a dismaying sight, as Dickens knew, however just its cause. ("There is a passion for *hunting something* deeply implanted in the human breast," he wrote.) Oliver resumes the placid life that his innocence deserves, the poor sap.

Harwood has chopped out the awkward coincidences, notably those surrounding Oliver's parentage, on the assumption that such melodramatic dovetailings would offend the taste of modern viewers. But is he right to assume as much? Dickens knew that melodrama answers to something permanent in our nature; without it, any version of "Oliver Twist" draws perilously close to



Barney Clark as Oliver: the scene now has the quality of myth, rather than fiction.

whose complicit grin to Oliver, when Mrs. Sowerberry is being her usual witchy self, is the first, minuscule intimation that the boy might be worthy of something better than contempt. Nevertheless, he flees. On arrival in London, he is hooked by the Artful Dodger (Harry Eden) and tossed into the pool of young piranhas presided over by Fagin (Ben Kingsley). Oliver is rescued by Mr. Brownlow (Edward Hardwicke), a pair of whiskers with a large supply of benevolence attached, then hauled back into the underworld by Bill Sikes (Jamie Foreman), with the aid of Nancy (Lianne Rowe). She makes amends by con-

the genteel. The film is rated PG-13. ("Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13." I would hope so.) We are, or used to be, forced to read Dickens at school, merely because the novels seethed with children, but the tutelage was wrong. Most of his writing is gnarled and difficult work for adults, not least when he insists that some lives, and some deaths, are inappropriate for children of any age: "I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected."

The bestiality is all-encompassing: bits of dead animal, meant to be consumed by another animal, are wolfed by a boy who is treated like an animal, and who should be witnessed by men of animal indifference. Such indignation has far outlived the Poor Law of 1834, against which it was directed. It continues to grate against those who think they know what to do about the poor but fail in the doing, or who never think about the poor at all. You can take Dickens's reforming instinct at face value; you can enfold it in his geniality, as Chesterton did; or you can claim, as John Carey does in "The Violent Effigy," that it was swamped by his obsession with the contorted and the corrupt. Whatever the case, the feelings that run through "Oliver Twist" must remain feverish, fleshly, and precise. Bumble should bridle and glower and puff like a toad, whereas the Bumble of the new film is like one more prig among many, albeit in a burgundy waistcoat. As for Rachel Portman's score, it seems expressly designed to bring the temperature down; when the boys in the workhouse sit picking apart old ropes, day after day, we are supposed to construe their task as a compulsory death of the spirit, but the jaunt of the music softens it into a moment of fiddly fun.

The London of the film was built in Prague, in grand style—perhaps too grand. I know that the bookshop where we first see Mr. Brownlow stands in one of the more fashionable districts, yet, with its lovingly painted frontage, it still looks more like a film set than like a real place. The very smearing of horse dung on the cobbles has an artful air. Ever since "Knife in the Water," Polanski has proved himself an immaculate judge of speed, and he whisks us through the nar-

rative at a clip. At the same time, one can't help noticing a certain flatness, a hint of afternoon dullness, descend upon the proceedings. "The Pianist" was similarly flat, but its plain record of circumstance seemed a matter of honor, as if to inflict ornamentation—any adventure in style—upon a tale of the Holocaust would be insulting. That can hardly apply to Dickens, with his living gargoyles, and the director he needs is the Polanski of "Cul de Sac," "Repulsion," and "Chinatown"—the Polanski who lost his mother at Auschwitz, and who became a Twist unto himself, wandering a world that he knew to be treacherous, and conjuring scenes, fictional or otherwise, that matched his disorientation.

So what on earth is a Jewish director to do with this?

It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew, to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal.

This is verbal atrocity. Every possible prejudice is enforced, up to the cannibal suggestion of the final phrase. One reader, Eliza Davis, wrote to complain, and many mentions of "the Jew" in the book were subsequently amended to "Fagin." Later, Mrs. Davis even congratulated Dickens for "atoning for an injury as soon as conscious of having inflicted it." Fair enough, except that her chiding letter arrived in 1863, and his emendations did not appear until the edition of 1867. The first edition had come out in 1838, almost thirty years earlier. That is a long time in which to become "conscious," and such stubbornness sets Polanski a question: Is the racial animus

in Dickens a vital cog, however vicious, in his imaginative machine, or should we, sixty years after Auschwitz, scorn such niceties and simply throw the anti-Semitism away?

What you cannot do is equip Ben Kingsley with the false nose and the red wig and pretend that nothing is amiss. If you are going to elide any reference to Fagin's Jewishness, as Polanski does, then why go to the bother of burdening him with the garments, stoop, and accent of the cartoon Jew? Why not reinvent him as a less encumbered villain—update the story, switch the setting, turn the workhouse into a Malaysian sweatshop, say, where Oliver stitches Western sneakers for half a bowl of soup? Kingsley, who threatened more with one scene of "Sexy Beast" than he does in the whole of "Oliver Twist," drifts slightly to the margins, as does Oliver himself, who arrives at happiness, with plastered-down hair, like an exhausted ghost. If the film does tighten its grip toward the end, that is because of Jamie Foreman's shark-eyed Sikes, and, above all, because of Lianne Rowe, whose Nancy, against all odds, pulls us to the heart of Dickens's darkness. As you watch Rowe and Foreman together, you suddenly realize why Dostoyevsky admired the novel so much. This Nancy is bustling and bosomy, as she should be, but her tigerish will to do one good deed in a naughty world is desperate and majestic. Without Nancy and her demon lover, Polanski's "Oliver Twist" feels handsome, steady, and respectful; it has that touch of mummification which wins awards. But Dickens had murder in mind—women killed for their kindness, children for lack of food—and he wanted us to howl and hyperventilate. He asked for more. ♦

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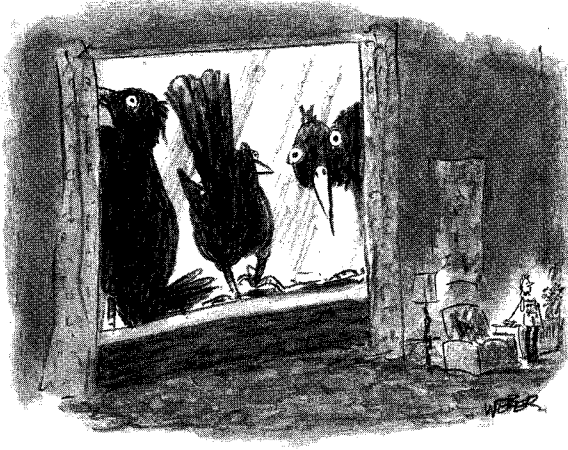
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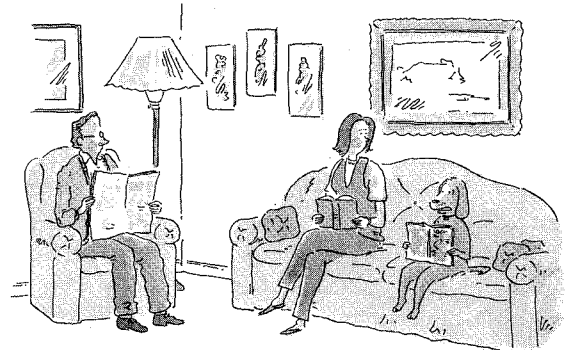
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mike Twohy, must be received by Sunday, October 2nd. Finalists in the September 19th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 17th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Yes, I tried tapping on the glass."
Rob Nieto, Kinnelon, N.J.



Shanahan

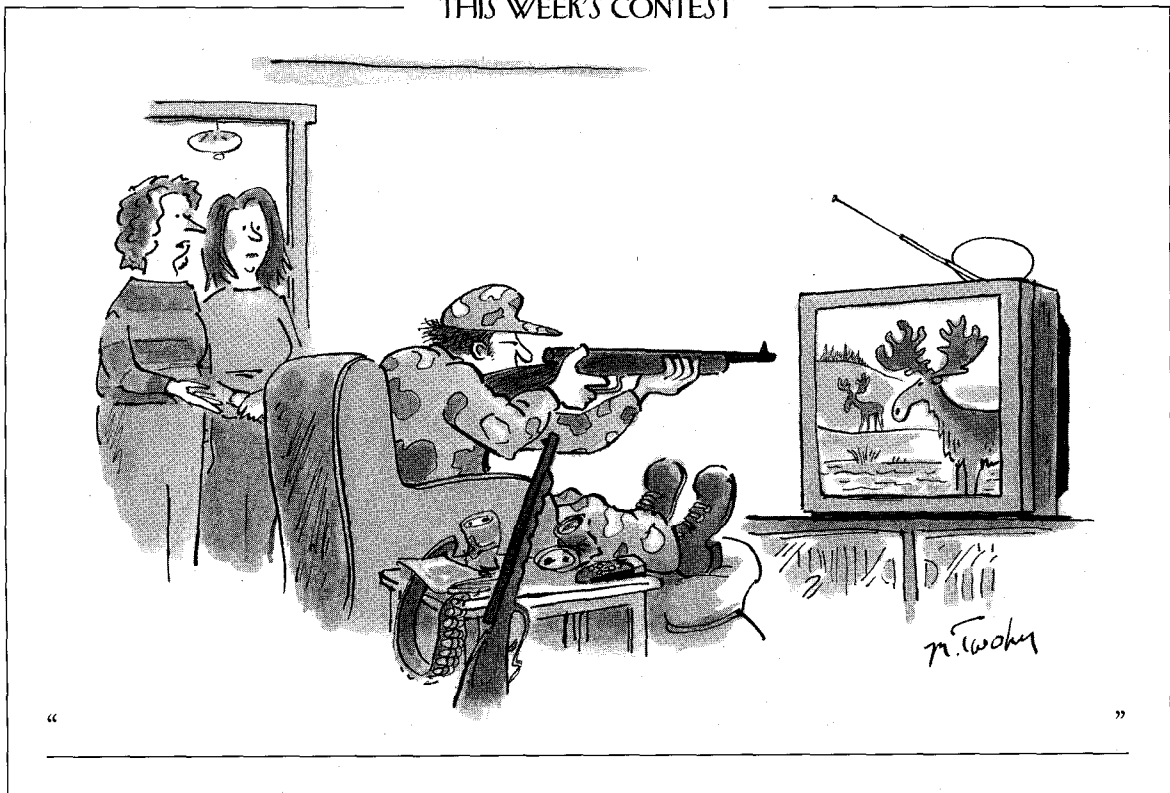
THE FINALISTS

"See Spot run.' See Spot run'? Who wrote this crap?"
Larry Martell, Albuquerque, N.M.

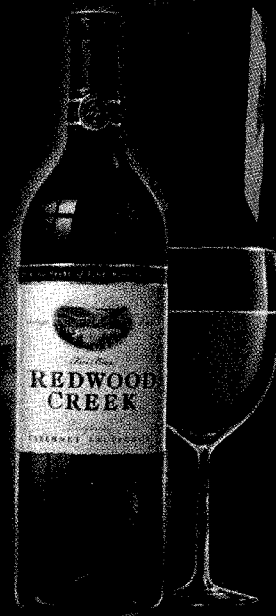
"You won't believe this, but I just remembered
where I buried the remote."
Greg Huber, Boston, Mass.

"Oh, did I mention that Timmy fell down the well?"
Kelly Bailey, San Francisco, Calif.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



*Let the flavor
carry you away...*



RIDE THE GONDOLA TO

REDWOOD CREEK

SATISFY YOUR TASTE FOR *ADVENTURE!*



1,000 songs: Impossibly small.  iPod nano